

HIRO AINANA

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19
DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody



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DEATH MARCH 19
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD **RHAPSODY**



LULU

Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.

ARISA

A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.

“Treespirit Pearl, lend us your power.
For Mother, Father, my brothers, Lili,
and all the others...”

““...Let this place be filled
with flowers!””



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19

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YEN
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Vice-Minister of Tourism

Satou here. When you enter a new environment, like starting school or a job, sometimes you realize how many different people you have connections with, even if you never realized it in your day-to-day life previously.

“Viscount Satou Pendragon, I wish to appoint you Vice-Minister of Tourism.”

One morning a few days after the auction, I was back at the royal castle.

Though I’d only come to collect our prize money from the king for defeating a floormaster, for some reason I was called to the prime minister’s office first. The muscular minister gave a very lengthy preamble before he hit me with the offer.

“Thank you, but I’m afraid that is far beyond my abilities.”

Naturally, I turned it down right away.

As tempting as the word *tourism* might be, I knew it was only a cover for an intelligence agency.

“Besides, I can hardly accept an official position with the kingdom without permission from my actual master, Count Muno.”

Sorry, Count Muno, I’m using you as a scapegoat.

“Not to worry. I have already gotten Count Muno’s permission to make this offer. Although that blasted Nina strong-armed me into making all sorts of concessions for Muno County in the process...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on the latter muttered remark.

I didn’t realize the prime minister was close enough with Viscount Nina Lottel, the capable councillor of Muno County, to call her by her first name.

“But surely someone of more noble birth and sound experience would be far

more...”

“You’re perfect for the role.”

The prime minister didn’t even let me finish my protest.

And I don’t know why he had to strike a weird pose to show off his muscles as he spoke...

“Tourism is an excellent field. As of now, the ministry only consists of myself and a few office workers. However, we are already furnished with golem horses that can tirelessly travel great distances, and armored carriages designed to hold up against attacks from even the most savage tribes. Once it is complete, His Majesty also intends to loan us a small airship for sightseeing.”

The prime minister must be into vehicles like that. He looked eager to take it for a spin himself.

While I’d certainly appreciate the means to travel more, it wasn’t that big of a deal when I had my own golems and airship. I guess the main advantage would be the ability to use them out in the open?

“We can also lend you a valuable Long-Distance Magisignal artifact. You’d be able to contact the capital at any time, though it requires high-quality cores for use.”

Evidently, a “Long-Distance Magisignal” was a magical communication device that couldn’t be recreated with modern Shiga Kingdom technology. It was used to call for advice and information from anywhere on your journey. Sort of like a credit card helpline, maybe?

As convenient as that sounded, it also seemed like it would anchor me more than I’d prefer.

“In addition, you would no doubt be able to use the prestige of the Shiga Kingdom to get a firsthand experience of facilities and events no ordinary tourist would ever see, enjoy cuisine only provided at the royal courts of each nation you visit, and so on.”

Okay, now *that* tempted me a little.

Sure, I could theoretically use Unit Deployment or Arisa’s Space Magic to

sneak into off-limits areas, but I'd probably feel too guilty to enjoy it.

"You'd also be permitted to use the Ministry of Tourism's budget for this year, one thousand gold coins, however you please. Of course, we'd have you submit expenditure reports—only as a formality, you understand."

Since I'd been making money faster than I could spend it lately, I didn't really care about the cash. If anything, I was actively looking for ways to invest it.

Still, what exactly was the prime minister fishing for with all this prime bait?

"...Of course, these privileges come with responsibilities."

The prime minister broached this topic with such perfect timing that I almost wondered if he'd read my mind.

I knew it. The other shoe was about to drop.

He was probably going to start talking about the secret intelligence work.

I'd better change the subject and get out of here fast before I get in too deep.

"When you visit other nations and cities, we would like you to write up a report of local places of interests, food specialties, and the like. If there are any local specialties that travel well, be sure to secure a sample and bring some back."

...Huh?

"In addition, you must either acquire a recipe for any notable specialties or investigate ways for you or one of your cooks to recreate it. If it requires ingredients not found in the Shiga Kingdom, look into substitutions as well. Ideally, in the case of produce, it would be best if you could secure seeds and the best methods of growing them."

Wait a minute...

Prime Minister, are you just trying to live vicariously through me because you usually can't go on trips outside the kingdom yourself?

As if sensing my suspicions, the prime minister cleared his throat and began to give what sounded like an official excuse.

"This is all in order to cultivate and preserve the cultures of various nations,

lest they be lost in these unprecedented times known as the ‘Era of the Demon Lord.’ It is most certainly not to satisfy my personal interests and appetite.”

Then why did you just mention your appetite...?

Knowing the prime minister, this might actually be a serious offer. But I had to make sure it wasn’t just an act.

“So I wouldn’t be required to make an intelligence assessment in these nations?”

“Of course not. Any areas that require such assessment have already been assigned to agents on the ground for dozens, in some cases even hundreds, of years. There would be no point in rushing a noble out onto the scene now.”

Ah, so there were agents already blending into these areas like undercover spies.

“The main reason I’ve come to you with this offer is your unique capability to efficiently accumulate food culture and recipes. And in the process of this collection, we hope that more nations will develop a positive relationship with the Shiga Kingdom.”

“A positive relationship? I doubt I would be able to cultivate something like that...”

“You need not worry about it yourself. Focus only on the food—or rather, cultural preservation, if you please.”

I didn’t quite understand, but focusing on food sounded easy enough to me.

Oh, I’d better ask one more question.

“What if the nation we’re visiting is invaded by monsters or demon lords?”

“If you face the likes of a demon lord or a dragon, run away at once. Otherwise, if you believe you and your party can triumph, you are free to save them or abandon them as you see fit.”

I just nodded. If he was serious about all that, then the prime minister really didn’t have any intentions to restrict my actions.

“In the case of a cross-national conflict, of course, you are forbidden from

backing one side or the other as a representative of Shiga Kingdom.”

So if I want to get involved in fights between nations, I just have to make sure I do it without anyone finding out who I am.

Uh-oh.

My thoughts were starting to lean toward accepting the offer.

I guess you don’t get to be a prime minister without mastering the art of influencing people.

“Are there provisions for retiring or stepping down?”

“As long as you’ve provided a report of the places you’ve visited, you are free to do as you please.”

Judging by this answer, he really didn’t intend to use me for intelligence gathering or diplomatic matters.

“Well, in that case...isn’t this a bit too beneficial for the appointed person?”

The prime minister snorted a laugh at my question.

“You’re a bit too soft for your own good, you know. Prudence is a virtue, yet you must have the mettle to at least take advantage of another’s verbal misstep, or you will surely be taken advantage of in older nations like the Saga Empire or the Garleon Alliance.”

The prime minister’s tone was serious.

“Besides...Nina and Duke Ougoch both said that if we send you off unfettered into the world, you’re likely to go ahead and take actions that will benefit the kingdom anyway.”

This last part was muttered so quietly that I wouldn’t have heard it without my “Keen Hearing” skill.

I certainly couldn’t deny that it sounded like me.

“Let us hear your answer, then.”

I fell silent for a moment.

Though it was tempting, there were few advantages to accepting the post.

But there didn't seem to be many disadvantages, either...

Still, if I wasn't sure about it, it was probably better to decline.

A political position like "vice-minister" could only bring trouble, even with a made-up reason like this one.

Just as I opened my mouth to decline, the prime minister seemed to sense my intention and patted a stack of books on his desk.

Then he handed me the twine-bound volume on top.

"What's this?"

"A collection of information about local specials and gourmet dishes from each nation that I've personally compiled."

What?!

"Surely a travel lover like yourself would do anything to get your hands on this, hmm?"

Oof, I can't believe he pulled out a trump card like that at the very last moment...

Well played, Prime Minister!

"If you accept the position of vice-minister, I will give you all of these books, as well as letters of introduction that I've acquired from influential people throughout the land. It should make negotiating easier with even the most temperamental chefs."

GG!!

Clearly, I wasn't getting out of this one.

I had to hand it to him this time, even if his smug smile irked me a little.

After a brief moment of thought...

I finally gave my assent to the prime minister.



"As reward for defeating the floormaster of the Upper Stratum of the Celivera Labyrinth, I hereby award Viscount Pendragon and his party with eight

thousand seven hundred gold coins.”

“We humbly accept.”

Once I accepted the prime minister’s offer, my group and I went to accept our floormaster reward from the king himself.

Of course, the majority of the money came from the spoils that had been sold at the auction.

It was nearly four thousand coins more than the reward given to the Scarlet Nobleman Baronet Jelil and his party for the Middle Stratum floormaster. It wasn’t that they didn’t earn a lot; we just earned way too much. That was probably thanks to all the dummy bids I made at the auction.

I was planning to split this money equally among the members of the party. They would probably need it once they all reached adulthood.

“This concludes the award ceremony.”

At the prime minister’s prompting, we left the audience room.

The ever-busy king apparently had lots of other visitors waiting.

“That’s a crazy amount of money. Are you going to invest it in the Echigoya Company again?”

Once we left, Arisa addressed me, her lilac hair hidden under a golden wig.

“I figured I’d split it among all of you.”

“Whaaat? No, don’t do that! You spent plenty of money raising and equipping all of us, didn’t you? Just keep it to compensate for all that. The rest of us already talked about this.”

I sent a questioning glance toward Liza, who was walking by Arisa’s side, and she gave a calm nod and affirmation. Judging by the sparkle of the orange scales that decorated her neck and wrists, as well as the magnificent swing of her tail, she didn’t seem to resent this. If anything, she almost looked proud.

“That wasn’t an investment on my part, though. It’s just standard child-rearing expenses, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Yeah, maybe, but stiiiiiill...”

Arisa didn't look convinced.

"Then why don't we all decide together how to use it?"

It was more than a thousand gold coins per person, which should have been enough to do all kinds of things.

"Master, we should use it to raise the larvae, I propose."

The blond-haired, busty Nana chimed in with her usual distinctive way of speaking and lack of expression.

She always called young children "larvae," even though she herself was technically younger than they were, being a homunculus who'd only existed for about a year.

"Mm, agreed."

Mia nodded wisely, her pale aqua-colored twintails shifting to show a hint of her slightly pointed elf ears. Unlike Nana, she looked like a child but was actually over a hundred years old.

"Maybe you could make a cooking school in Labyrinth City or something, Lulu?"

"Oh, that's a lovely idea! There are lots of kids there who want to learn how to cook."

Lulu beamed with a smile so beautiful that it seemed to put the sun to shame. With each step, light bounced playfully off her glossy black hair.

"I think you should teach them to make lots and lots of meat dishes, sir!"

Pochi, who sported a brown bob as well as dog ears and a tail, raised her hand in a brisk salute as her eyes sparkled.

"A sign shop, tooo?"

Next to Pochi was the laid-back Tama, who had short white hair along with cat ears and a tail.

An unexpected master of the arts, Tama had created signs for various food stalls in Labyrinth City that led to a massive spike in sales. While art supplies were relatively expensive, it might be possible to reduce the costs in Labyrinth

City. I decided to try making paint recipes using labyrinth materials and offering them to the merchants' guild.

"...Sir Pendragon, do you have a moment?"

I turned to the source of the voice and found Baronet Jelil, the Scarlet Nobleman, in red armor.

His Magic Sword Icebranch Fang already hung at his waist again, even though he must have had to surrender it during the audience with the king.

"What is it?"

"I hear tell that you and Ms. Black Spear have withdrawn your candidacy for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen. You'll not change your mind?"

"No, neither Liza nor I have any desire to join the Shiga Eight."

He probably had a vested interest since he was also a candidate.

"No desire...? Are you implying that if you desired it, you could join whenever you wanted?"

There was a faint note of anger in Mr. Jelil's voice.

It was unlike the normally intellectual Jelil to latch onto someone's verbal gaffe like that.

He must be really on edge.

"I apologize if I misspoke and struck a nerve. I only meant that we withdrew because I judged that we lacked the qualifications to be candidates for the Shiga Eight."

I reassured Jelil with help from my "Fabrication" and "Making Excuses" skills.

"What sort of qualifications?"

I couldn't very well be truthful and say "We aren't loyal enough to the Shiga Kingdom," so I just smiled vaguely without responding to his query.

Luckily, he didn't press the matter further, and I told him I looked forward to his appointment as a new member of the Shiga Eight before we parted ways.

I really did think his chances were pretty high. He was an ideal candidate in

both strength and personality, and now that Mr. Gouen had been expelled due to his involvement in the attempted assassination of Duke Vistall, there were three open seats for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

“Sir Pendragon, Your Excellency.”

This time, it was a castle chamberlain who addressed me.

I thought he might be a messenger for Mia’s and Arisa’s friend Princess Sistina, only to find that he was actually from the military minister Marquis Kelten.

He said that he had a letter and message from the marquis.

“Who’s it from?”

“Marquis Kelten. It says Miss Cyna’s grandfather wants to thank you for saving her and invites you to visit his mansion.”

I addressed the former part to Arisa, and the latter to Tama and Pochi, the invitees.

“We’ve been invited to our bestie’s house, sir!”

“Yaaay, fuuun!”

Pochi and Tama spun around in a dance.

They appeared to be beside themselves with joy at being invited to their best friend’s home.

Several other people stopped me in the hall after that, until finally a messenger from Princess Sistina came to summon all of us to the princess’s reception room.

“Lord Satou, Lady Mia, Arisa. Welcome, all of you.”

When we arrived at the room, the princess greeted us with a smile.

She addressed Mia with an honorific title because the elves of Bolenan Forest are highly respected throughout the kingdom; for me, a much lower rank than she, it was because of her fascination with my spell-developing abilities.

“Who?”

Mia tilted her head at a young girl who bore a strong resemblance to Princess Sistina.

“Lady Mia, allow me to introduce you. This is my little sister Doris.”

Princess Doris stood and curtsied to Mia.

“Pleased to meet you, Lady Misanaria of Bolenan Forest. I am Doris Shiga, twelfth princess of the Shiga Kingdom, ten years old.”

Honestly, from her appearance I thought she was even younger.

“My name is Misanaria Bolenan, youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

“Pochi is Pochi, sir!”

“Tama is Tamaaa?”

Pochi and Tama couldn’t resist joining in after Mia’s formal introduction.

“Oh my! Animal-eared folk!”

With the pair’s permission, Princess Doris touched their ears.

Once she appeared satisfied, I introduced the rest of our number to the princesses.

Princess Doris seemed to take an immediate liking to Tama and Pochi; before long, they were sitting on either side of her, eating snacks together.

“Oh dear. And here I only allowed her to join us because she wanted to meet Lady Mia...”

While Princess Sistina sounded exasperated, there was obvious fondness in her eyes as she watched her younger sister.

Before long, I was deep in conversation about spells with Princess Sistina. While Arisa and Mia seemed relaxed, Liza and Lulu looked nervous throughout the entire proceedings, so I cut things short as early as possible without seeming rude.

Nana, of course, was able to fit into her surroundings at her own unique pace as usual.

“Ah yes, Lord Satou. If you wouldn’t mind, might I introduce you to my elder brother Sortorik?”

“As in His Highness the Crown Prince?”

“Yes, he shares the same mother as Doris and me. I’m sure he’d be happy to meet you if I were the one to request it.”

Princess Sistina was trying to do me a favor by offering me a connection to Crown Prince Sortorik, the next in line to be king...but to be honest, I didn’t really want that.

For one thing, I didn’t exactly get a positive impression of him during the auction.

“I appreciate your kind offer, but I’m afraid a youngster like myself would only be wasting the Crown Prince’s valuable time. I would much rather let him use that time to the kingdom’s benefit.”

“Ooh, Satou hates our big brother.”

Princess Doris spoke up a little too frankly.

“That isn’t true at all, Doris. Lord Satou is a wise and modest man who doesn’t wish to interfere with our elder brother’s work, that’s all.”

“...Really?”

“Yes, it’s just as Her Highness says.”

I latched onto the lifeline Princess Sistina had tossed me with all my might.

“You must be rather free today, I imagine? Would you like to join me for dinner? My maid tells me we’ve some Ohmi beef of the finest marbling in store for this evening.”

Although the beastfolk girls’ eyes sparkled at this invitation, we unfortunately already had plans for the rest of the day.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid we have business in the villa.”

“You mean Gou...? No, very well. I suppose there’s nothing to be done, then. I do hope you’ll join me for dinner soon—at least once before you leave the royal capital, that is.”

I agreed to this with a smile, and left the princess's room with the rest of my group in tow.

Our next destination was the detached villa on the castle grounds where nobles were kept for house arrest.

"Miss Lulu! Miss Nana!"

"Good to see you, Sherin."

"Have you been practicing? I inquire."

"Of course!"

The girl who greeted us with a big smile was Miss Sherin, eldest daughter of the former Shiga Eight member, Mr. Roitall Gouen.

After training under Lulu's and Nana's instruction, she was officially starting at the knights' school of the royal academy this spring.

"Hellooo?"

"Meowdy, sir."

"Aah, it's Tama and Pochi!"

Sherin grinned and high-fived Tama and Pochi.

The three of them had become close after surviving an intense battle during the spring expedition that involved both the knights' school special class and the preschool class.

"Hey, Satou."

While I watched the kids chatting happily, a giant man emerged from the courtyard with a woman and young child in tow: Mr. Gouen and his wife and second daughter.

"Thanks for looking out for our Sherin."

"Oh, I haven't done anything much. If you must thank someone, thank the girls."

"I'll do just that, then," he said with a slight smile, and headed over to Sherin and the others.

“Miss Lulu, Miss Nana. Thanks to you, Sherin was able to keep a level head on the battlefield and survive. It’s your training that helped her get accepted into the knights’ school, too. I’m deeply grateful to ya both.”

“Oh, no, not at all...!”

“Yes, Gouen. We accept your thanks, I reply.”

In stark contrast to Lulu’s flustered response, Nana sounded aloof.

“These ladies are your teachers, big sis?”

“That’s right. Miss Lulu is much stronger than she looks, you know.”

“Ooh, coool!”



Sherin responded proudly to her younger sister, who'd whispered in her ear.

"Oh, right—Miss Pochi, Miss Tama. I only got to see my daughter again because you beat those big strong monsters. I thank you and honor your bravery."

"Tee-hee."

"I'm blushing, sir."

The pair of them wriggled shyly.

"It was Hikaru who finished off the really big monster, sir," Pochi added.

"Hikaru...is that Duchess Mitsukuni?"

I nodded, a little surprised that he knew about her.

"Don't worry, I already thanked Her Excellency."

Tama and Pochi nodded at this.

Hikaru had apparently come to visit the day after the incident.

While we were chatting about Hikaru, Miss Sherin, and so on, the supervisor of the villa eventually directed us to take our leave.

"Hey, Satou, if you get the chance...look out for Lady Somienna, too, yeah?"

Somienna was Duke Vistall's youngest daughter and had personally prevented Gouen from killing his master Duke Vistall at the risk of her own life. He must have felt deeply grateful to her since he wasn't doing the deed of his own free will.

"Of course. I can't promise I'll be of much help, but I'll certainly listen to her troubles, at the very least."

"That's more than enough. Thank you, Satou."

Ignoring the persistent supervisor, I shook hands with Mr. Gouen, waved to the rest of his family, and left the villa.



"Now that we've received our recompense from His Majesty, let's decide who should use the Gift Orbs, shall we?"

Since our plans for today were highly confidential, we gathered at our secret base. Nana's sisters and Hikaru were there, too, of course.

"You got 'Paralysis Resistance' and 'Water Magic' at the auction, right?"

"That's right."

Lulu had already used the "Analyze Goods" orb we got from our floormaster spoils and acquired the skill.

"Why not just stick with what we talked about before? We'll have either our tank Nana or our healer Mia take 'Paralysis Resistance,' and Nana or Lulu take 'Water Magic.'"

"Okay, which one would use 'Paralysis Resistance'?"

"Nana," Mia responded immediately.

"True, it might be best for our shield user to have it."

Since no one else had any objections, the "Paralysis Resistance" skill went to Nana.

"What about 'Water Magic'?"

"I will withdraw, I declare."

"I'll hold off, too. I can technically use skill level one spells without having the right magic skill, as long as I don't mind a little headache, so I don't really need it. What about you and the other sisters, Adin? You don't have anyone who knows Healing Magic, right?"

As a compromise, Arisa offered the orb to the eldest of the sisters, Adin, also known as Number 1.

"Is it really all right for us to take such a valuable item? None of us can use Healing Magic, but we are all capable of foundation techniques to stop bleeding and accelerate regeneration..."

"Me! Me, me, me! Huit wishes to try Healing Magic, I declare."

Adin's attempted show of restraint was interrupted by Number 8, Huit.

"Request denied."

Number 2, Ithnani, immediately rejected Huit's request.

"Why? I inquire."

"Because you would forget to heal us, I reply."

"Agreed. The reliable Vier would be a better fit, I propose."

Number 5, Fünf, agreed with Ithnani's assessment, while Number 6, Seis, suggested Number 4.

"Tria too! Tria is also interested in Healing Magic!"

Tria hopped up and down with excitement until Adin shut her down.

"You are not a suitable choice. You are often away from the rest of us scouting or setting traps."

"Boo-hoo. Tria is disappointed."

"What do you think, Mito...I mean, Hikaru?"

"I think Vier is a good fit, too. Do you want to do it, though?"

When Adin asked Hikaru, she turned to Vier for her opinion.

"...I don't mind," Vier mumbled.

She was the quietest of the sisters.

"Master, is it all right if Vier uses 'Water Magic'?"

"Sure. Whoever you all choose is fine with me."

I nodded at Nana's sisters.

Thus, Nana acquired the "Paralysis Resistance" skill, and Vier acquired "Water Magic."

"Vier, I'll give you some Water Magic spellbooks. These three books contain the standard spells used in the Shiga Kingdom. This one is military-use 'Water Magic,' and this last one is original spells that I created. Make sure you don't use those in front of anyone else."

"Yes, Master."

Vier nodded and stored the spellbooks in her Fairy Pack.

The sisters had each gotten their own when they finished training in Bolenan Forest.

When Lulu went back to our home to prepare for dinner, I gave everyone permission to do as they pleased for a while.

The beastfolk girls went to get some exercise before dinner, while Nana and her sisters went to support Vier's "Water Magic" training.

"Master, are those the scrolls we got in the auction?"

"Yeah, I figured I might as well use them now."

I headed for an open area while I talked with Arisa. Mia and Hikaru came along, too.

We acquired three scrolls in the auction.

The Space Magic spell Material Transfer could move nonliving things. The basic version could only transport things about as large as a pebble, but from my magic menu, it could transport boulders, too. Maybe I could use it for a "Mini Meteor" attack.

"Wow."

"Turning 'Material Transfer' into 'Meteor'..."

"You're like a one-man siege machine."

Mia, Arisa, and Hikaru all commented from the sidelines. Honestly, I've had enough skills to do a one-man siege for ages now.

Next, I tried the Summoning Magic spell Summon Pigeon.

This spell summons a carrier pigeon and sends a letter to a chosen person or location. Sadly, using it from the magic menu didn't change the effects.

"Eh, kinda boring."

"I was hoping you'd at least be able to summon an Elder Pigeon."

"Cute."

While Arisa and Hikaru were unimpressed, Mia was happy to cuddle the friendly pigeon.

The next spell, a combination of Water Magic and Wind Magic from the Overgrown Labyrinth, was a lot crazier.

From the scroll, it only produced a vaguely unpleasant smell. From my menu, however, it was as powerful as a tear-gas bomb. When I turned its strength up to the max, it started killing demi-goblins left and right. I'd have to be especially careful with this one.

"It's like a biological weapon."

"Yeah, I actually feel bad for the demi-goblins."

"Mean."

The crowd didn't like this one.

With its strength reduced to the minimum, it might be useful for distracting people. The demi-goblins of the labyrinth would have to put up with my experiments until I got the hang of controlling it.

"Is that all? Didn't you get some sketchy scroll from Viscount Siemmen?"

I'd forgotten about the mysterious scroll until Arisa reminded me. Now was as good a time as any to use that, too.

"What kind of spell is it?"

"It's a Shadow Magic spell called Shadow Mirror. I'm not sure what it does."

This spell wasn't in the Undead King Zen's Shadow Magic spellbook I found in Trazayuya's Cradle.

"Do you know it, Hikaru?" Arisa asked.

"Yeah, I had a minor run-in with some folks who specialized in it in the Flue Empire."

Hikaru explained that there had been an annoying group of people called the Phantom Peach Orchard, and she was getting riled up as she reflected on the past.

"So what does the spell do?"

"It uses one shadow to display something that's visible from another shadow. You can hear voices, too, but it goes both ways, so it's not great for secret

surveillance. If anything, it's sort of like a video call version of Telephone."

Most users of the spell were limited to a distance of a few miles; a few were able to use it within the range of a single city at best.

"But since there aren't many spells that let you see someone and speak to them directly, powerful people in the Flue Empire had their own hired Shadow Mirror users. That's what gave those Phantom Peach Orchard jerks free rein to cause trouble, though."

Hikaru looked bitter as she finished this statement.

This group must have given her a lot of grief.

Lulu came to get us before I could get into really testing it out, putting an end to the day's magic experiments once I added the new spell to my magic menu. I also used the other scrolls I'd gotten with the prime minister's help, like the military Earth Magic spell Iron Toss and the Wind Magic spells Turbulence and Fallen Hammer.

Since the other scrolls I ordered from Viscount Siemmen probably wouldn't be ready before we left the royal capital, I would have to find a good time to go pick them up as Akindoh, Viscount Pendragon's personal merchant.



The day after we visited the villa, I went with the beastfolk girls to the mansion of the military minister, Marquis Kelten.

Beyond the imposing gate that suited the home of a military man was a gorgeous garden full of beautifully blossoming flowers.

"Pochi! Tama!"

"Bestie, sir!"

"And our henchmen, tooo?"

A garden party was in full swing. In addition to Viscount Kelten's granddaughter and Pochi and Tama's best friend Miss Cyna, their apprentice-like "henchmen" were also present, as well as other young boys and girls.

Pochi and Tama looked up at me for permission, and I nodded to indicate that they could go play.

“Why, hello, Satou.”

As I watched the pair run off, a sultry voice summoned me.

Turning around, I found Mrs. Rayuna Raffol, a marquis’s wife with a perpetually sensual air about her.

Behind her was her close friend Mrs. Ema Litton, a count’s wife who held a great deal of influence in the royal capital’s noble society.

“Hello there, Lady Rayuna, Lady Ema.”

When I greeted them, a murmur arose from the nearby nobles.

Judging by my experiences at previous tea parties, they were probably shocked that I addressed the ladies by their first names.

“How unusual to see you at His Excellency Kelten’s home. Are you trying to make connections in the military now, even though you’ve just been made Vice-Minister of Tourism?”

As usual, Count Litton’s wife was on top of the latest news.

“Since you’ve so many friends in the Shiga Eight, I would suggest you aim to get in with high-ranking officers and imperial knights next.”

I thanked them for their advice before clarifying that I wasn’t here to network.

“I’ve come today because young Lady Cyna kindly befriended a few of my kids during the spring class at the preschool, you see.”

“Oh my, is that so? Well, more importantly, you must look at this necklace.”

“And my earrings, too.”

Mrs. Litton and Mrs. Raffol showed me their spoils from the auction.

The Echigoya Company produced this jewelry for the auction using magic gemstones.

After a round of compliments for the jewelry as well as for the ladies themselves, I explained that I would soon be leaving the royal capital to travel around to various nations.

“What a shame. Just as we were getting to be such good friends.”

“How long will you be traveling?”

“My apologies. I plan to return to the royal capital by the time the items you both requested arrive.”

Since the jewels with their family crests that they’d requested by way of Satou were supposedly being made by a jeweler in a southern island country, I’d told them it would be at least six months.

While we lamented our parting, I asked the well-informed ladies to tell me about any interesting places they knew of in the surrounding nations.

As we were wrapping up our conversation, I heard cheers from the direction of the garden party.

“What’s all the fuss about?”

“Well, these are military folks. Perhaps a Shiga Eight member has arrived?”

Brimming with curiosity, we headed toward the source of the commotion.

“Incredible, Marquis Kelten!”

“Truly the work of a master! That iron armor’s been sliced in twain!”

The military nobles were all clamoring around Marquis Kelten, who had a Magic Sword in hand.

“Marquis Kelten? Really?”

“Is he really all that special of a swordsman?”

The two noble wives whispered to one another.

“Your Excellency! One more time, please!”

“Oh yes, do let us see as well!”

“Hmph. If you insist.”

Marquis Kelten channeled magic power into the sword.

The magic blade glowed dimly, creating a faint outline of red light around it.

“Why, it’s ‘Spellblade.’”

“He must have won that at the auction.”

Mrs. Litton and Mrs. Raffol correctly identified the red blade of light.

“Oh, Grandfather, you’re at it *again*?”

A little girl appeared next to us, crossing her arms.

Her facial features bore a strong resemblance to Miss Cyna’s. According to my AR display’s information, she was a daughter of the Kelten family by the name of Dumolina.

“Masterrr?”

“It’s Master, sir.”

Tama and Pochi popped up behind me and latched onto my legs. Cyna had come along with them, too.

Always minding her manners, Miss Cyna gave me a polite, ladylike greeting.

“Would you believe it, Cyna? Grandfather’s already getting carried away again, even though he only just ran out of magic and collapsed the other day from using ‘Spellblade’ too much. I must say, I can scarcely believe that he’s the head of the military!”

In spite of her cherubic appearance, Cyna’s elder sister Dumolina was evidently quite harsh.

“Ha-ha-ha. Show a little mercy, Dumolina.”

Cyna’s and Dumolina’s father, the honorary Viscount Kelten, strode over with a chuckle. The second son of Marquis Kelten, he headed up the budget bureau of the royal military. He was the spitting image of his father.

“Father, this is Viscount Pendragon.”

“Oh-ho, the one I’ve heard so much about? Why, you’re much younger than I expected.”

After we exchanged greetings, Cyna’s father gave me his thanks that Pochi and Tama had saved his daughter.

He had already thanked the two of them directly.

“Look at this, sir!”

“We got a giiift?”

Grinning delightedly, Tama and Pochi held up the decorative gift basket they’d gotten from Cyna’s father.

It contained an assortment of carefully wrapped high-quality ham, sausage, and so on. I’m sure their “bestie” Cyna had some input on the gift selection.

“I’ve already sent a formal gift of thanks to your mansion. Please don’t hesitate to accept it. I assure you there’s no underlying meaning of any sort.”

After whispering in my ear, Cyna’s father went to collect the Marquis and bring him over.

“Were you watching, by any chance, Sir Pendragon?”

“Yes, I saw your magnificent ‘Spellblade’ from over here, Your Excellency.”

Marquis Kelten was in a smashing good mood.

“Pochi can do it, too, sir!”

“Tama tooo?”

Before I could stop them, the girls pulled out sausages from the gift basket and used them to create ‘Spellblade.’

“‘S-spellblade’ on something other than a Magic Sword?!”

The marquis looked shocked.

But true to his seasoned position as the military minister, he quickly recovered.

“No wonder you’re mithril explorers! Such mastery at such a young age.”

With that, Marquis Kelten patted Tama and Pochi on the head.

“Viscount Pendragon, I must thank you and your vassals for rescuing my granddaughter from grave peril. If the Kelten family can do anything to assist you, you need only ask me.”

Another wave of commotion ran through the nearby crowd of military nobles at the marquis’s generous offer.

Using my “Poker Face” skill to the fullest, I responded with a simple “Thank you, you are much too kind.”

“Although the Shiga Eight Swordsmen candidates have been chosen, the final round of selection will take place from the second squadron being sent to suppress the rebellion in Vistall Duchy.”

Oh, right. I read in a newspaper extra that the first squadron sent to stop the rebellion took back one city in Vistall Duchy only to be wiped out.

“They leave tomorrow. If you like, Sir Pendragon, I can put in a recommendation for you to join up?”

“No, thank you. With my lack of experience, I would only hold them back.”

“Nonsense. Everyone’s a beginner at first. Why, I could even get you signed up as an officer in the royal knights and...”

Uh-oh. Marquis Kelten was getting a little pushy.

“All right, that’s enough of that!”

“Hear, hear! It would be unthinkable to let our Sir Satou’s talents go to waste in military service!”

The gourmet-loving noble pair from the old capital came to my rescue.

“Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, eh? Seeing the two of you get along so swimmingly makes me fear that hellfire might rain down from the sky next.”

Marquis Kelten turned to the duo with an unreadable expression.

“Hmph. No feud is worth fighting over in the face of shrimp tempura.”

“Indeed, I see no purpose in clashing with a fellow appreciator of the greatness of red pickled ginger tempura.”

What does that even mean?

“I, too, am well aware of Sir Pendragon’s magnificent cooking, you two. Yet is it not the finest honor any master could dream of to be appointed to the Shiga Eight Swordsmen?”

I recognized the military man who came over and addressed the pair.

It was Baron Jeetbert, a noble of Ougoch Duchy who I rescued when he was shipwrecked in the Seadragon Islands.

“It’s good to see you again, Your Excellency Baron Jeetbert.”

“I apologize for not greeting you sooner. Been a while—I mean, it is an honor to see you again, Viscount Pendragon. You need not call me ‘Your Excellency’ or anything of the sort, you know. Congratulations on your well-deserved promotion to viscount.”

Baron Jeetbert corrected his tone to a more formal one partway through.

“I do apologize for my lateness. I know I promised to see you at the kingdom meeting.”

Oh yeah, I guess he did say that when we parted ways in Sutoandell, the trade city in the Ougoch Duchy.

“Though it hardly makes up for my negligence, I’ve collected many fine products from the coastline and peninsulas of the Shiga Kingdom, just as promised. I will deliver them to your manor in the near future.”

What an upright guy.

Baron Jeetbert and Cyna’s father had apparently been classmates at the knights’ school of the royal academy. Soon, they were clearly getting back into their old rhythm, holding an arm-wrestling tournament in a corner of the garden party.

Incidentally, I should note the winner wound up being Liza, who accidentally used her full strength.



“Your Majesty, I have come to report that we will be returning to our territory.”

In one of the smaller audience rooms of the royal capital, Count Leon Muno bowed to the king.

I was there accompanying him and his councillor Nina Lottel.

Uncharacteristically, the prime minister wasn’t by the king’s side. Instead, he was flanked only by Sir Reilus, the Holy Shield and third seat of the Shiga Eight,

as well as a few aides.

“Very good. I trust you will work hard to continue developing your nation for the betterment of the Shiga Kingdom and its people.”

The king paused for a moment, gazing at Count Muno, and continued in a softer tone.

“Take good care of Muno County, Leon.”

“O-of course, Your Majesty! Understood.”

Count Muno bowed his head deeply.

I found out later that when Leon was studying heroes in the royal capital as Baronet Donano, it was the current king who appointed him lord of the former Muno Barony. That might be why the king seemed to have a vested interest in Count Muno.

While I was reflecting on all that, the meeting came to an end, and we left the audience room.

“Count Muno, will you be going back home on the next airship, too?”

Count Kuhanou called out to us in the hall.

He was on his way to report his return like Count Muno just had.

“Yes, that’s right. And you, Count Kuhanou?”

“Indeed. I look forward to our journey, then.”

The trip to the northeastern part of the kingdom would be via airship until they reached Ougoch Duchy, then by ship on the great river to the northern edge of the county, and farther north from there by carriage. This meant that Count Kuhanou would be on the same route with them until Muno City.

“Will you be traveling with Count Muno as well, Sir Pendragon?”

“No, I’ll be stopping by Labyrinth City, then traveling to various nations.”

“Oh? Well, it is good to travel while you’re still young. Broaden your horizons, and find new ways to be of help to Count Muno, eh?”

I nodded at his encouragement and thanked him for lending me his sword

during the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony incident.

“Oh, not at all. A sword is little more than decoration to a lord. Although, speaking of the sword you returned to me, where in the world did you take it for maintenance?”

“I asked a friend of mine to fix it up. Was there a quality issue?”

“Quite the opposite—I’m amazed at how well they sharpened it up. It cut cleaner than it ever has before when I took it for a test run. I was hoping you’d introduce me to this master craftsman.”

Sorry, I can’t. I did it myself.

“It was the work of a blacksmith known as Hephaistos. He’s very talented, but I’m afraid he is also quite flighty and moves about frequently... I haven’t the faintest idea where he might be at the moment.”

“A wandering master blacksmith, eh...? Your connections never cease to amaze me, Sir Pendragon.”

Thanks to my “Fabrication” skill, Count Kuhanou bought my story.

“Well then, please tell this master blacksmith of yours to come by my castle if ever he finds himself in Kuhanou County. Hmph, er...”

“Hephaistos.”

“...Right, Hephaistos. I’ll let my gatekeepers and viceroys know about him, too, then.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Sir Hephaistos as soon as I can get in touch again.”

Since Count Kuhanou seemed so taken with my work, I would have to make a new disguise mask and pay him a visit if we stopped by Kuhanou County sometime.

It could be fun to check out the capital, Kuhanou City.

After parting ways with Count Kuhanou, I chatted with Ms. Nina as we continued down the hall.

“You said you’ll be traveling to different nations, yes? Is this for your new job as the Vice-Minister of Tourism?”

“Yes, that’s part of it.”

Mostly I just wanted to travel for fun.

“Still, I have to admit, I didn’t think you’d take the gig. As part of the deal, Muno County is getting bumped to the top of the list for a small airship from the kingdom, ten Champion’s Swords and Spears, and a two-year extension of our special tax exemption, to boot.”

She really squeezed the prime minister for all he was worth. I should’ve expected no less from Ms. Nina.

“By the way, if you’re hitting the road, what about Miss Karina? Will you be taking her along?”

“No, Lady Karina was hoping to train in Labyrinth City. Some friends of mine—Nana’s sisters—will be training in the labyrinth there, so I thought she could work alongside them.”

“Miss Nana has sisters, eh? Are they strong?”

“Well, they’ve trained in the elf village. I’d say they’re around as strong as my group was when we arrived in Labyrinth City ourselves. Besides, Lady Karina has Raka to help her.”

Even putting her own strength aside, Miss Karina could probably handle most situations with the support of the Intelligent Item Raka. He provided great protection, too.

“...Hmm. What do you think, Count?”

“As her father, I would prefer to keep her out of danger. But if that is what she wishes, I would like to let her do as she will.”

“You’re way too soft on her.”

Ms. Nina rolled her eyes at Count Muno, then turned back to me.

“I wish she’d just settle down with you and stay at home.”

“If you forced Lady Karina to do such a thing, she would run away from the castle again.”

“...Right. She did go running to the giants for help when I was stuck in jail.”

I had to convince Ms. Nina, given that I'd promised Miss Karina that I would make a case for her going back to Labyrinth City to train.

"Oh, all right. We'll let her have her way for a year or so. Does that work for you, Count?"

"Yes, of course."

Count Munro nodded.

Within a year's time, she'd probably reach around level 50 and get bored of training in the labyrinth, anyway.

"Satou, now that you're an upper noble, you'll have to land a wife in the next year, too."

"Oh, I'm still too young for that."

"It's kingdom law, you know. An unmarried head of an upper noble family without a legitimate heir has to have a child within a year. So whether it's a proper wife or a mistress, you'll need to get yourself a wife and start making a baby right away."

"You're joking..."

"Would I joke about this? For your information, if you don't have a child within three years, you're required to get a second wife or a mistress."

...For real?

Multiple wives, or husbands in the case of a female head of household, are mandatory? I can't believe they have legally enforced polygamy... The Shiga Kingdom is truly next level.

Well, the stipulation specifies "a legitimate heir," meaning hopefully all I need is a successor. If they try to force me to get married, I'll just find some clever kid who wants to be a noble and adopt them into the Viscount Pendragon family.

"Come on, I heard from Ema and Rayuna that all the girls wanted a piece of you at their tea parties and get-togethers. Isn't there a single girl that interested you? Any maids you might've taken home?"

I didn't realize Nina was friends with Mrs. Litton and Mrs. Raffol. She really

does know everyone.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“If you say so. Well, if you don’t find a wife in the next year, you can just marry Miss Karina. Having a wife who’s older than you isn’t so bad, you know.”

I do prefer older women, but from my perspective, Karina is still way too young.

I invoked the classic procrastination password phrase known as “I’ll think about it” to evade the question, and accompanied Count Muno and company to check out the mansion he received from the king.



That evening, after I visited the new Muno manor, I went to the Echigoya Company to finish off some work before we left the royal capital.

“Welcome back, Lord Kuro.”

“Thank you, Miss Manager.”

The blond, beautiful manager Eluterina greeted me with a shining smile.

“Lord Kuro, I’ve gathered all of the various ingots, scrap gemstones, and refinement scraps you requested. The precious metals are in the underground treasury, and the rest had to be kept in a spare storehouse at the factory, due to the sheer amount.”

“You really work fast, Tifaleeza.”

The managing secretary, a lovely silver-haired girl named Tifaleeza, handed me an inventory list.

I mass-purchased the different kinds of ingots for transmutation, magic tool creation, and other assorted uses. The scrap gemstones were for magic jewels, and the refinement scraps were for extracting rare metals. From the looks of it, she’d managed to purchase the latter in bulk at bargain prices.

As I looked over the papers, it took all the power of my “Poker Face” skill to keep a satisfied grin off my face.

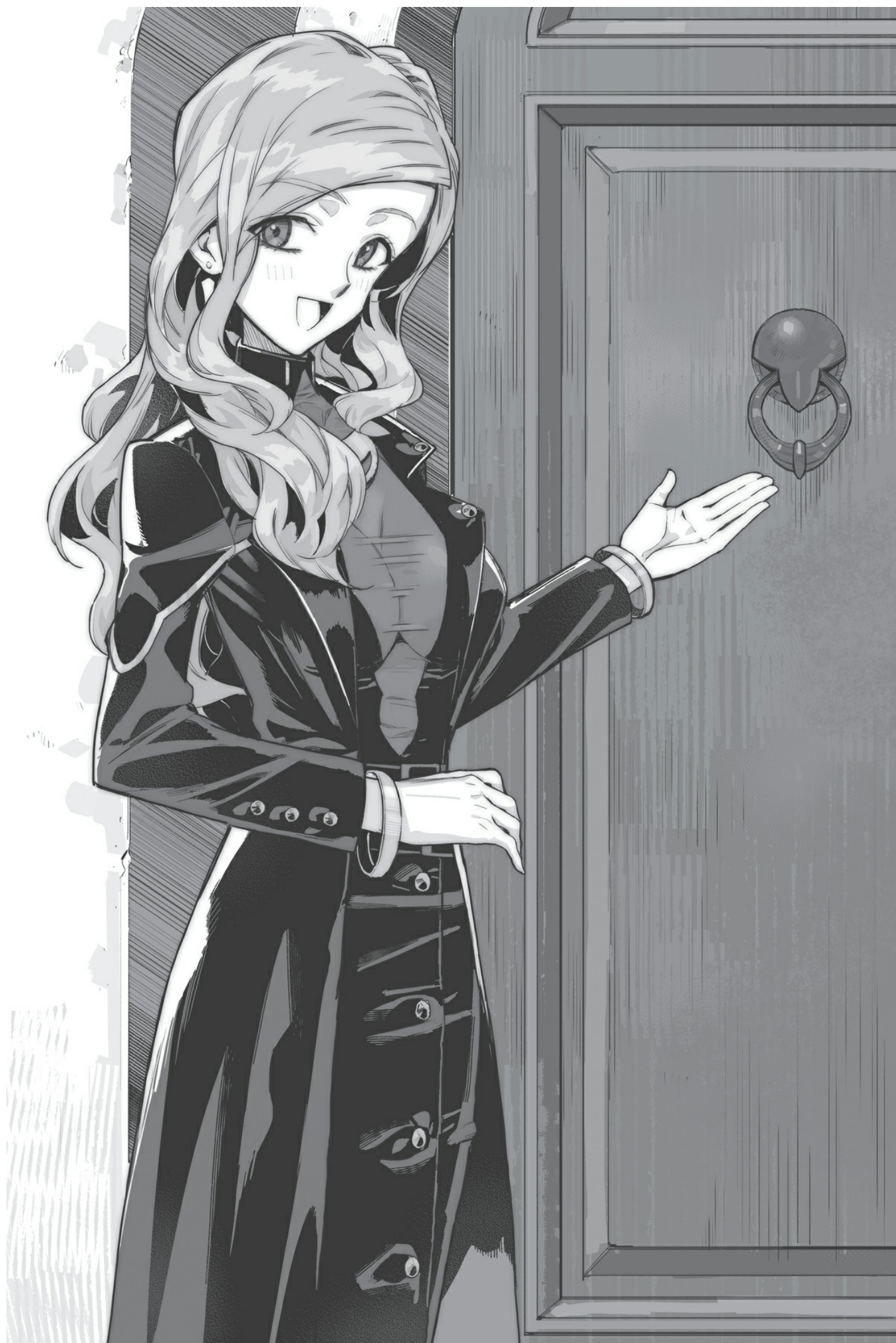
“Platinum and iridium are rare finds. Did you make a new business contact?”

“Yes, the Sahbe Company heard we were looking to buy metal ingots and came to strike a deal with us.”

The Sahbe Company was run by the weaselfolk man, Mr. Homimudory.

Since these ingots were difficult to process, they had no interested buyers and were willing to sell them to us for the same price as gold ingots. They’d also tried to sell us three Spirit Magic scrolls, a purchase that the managers put on hold.

“Spirit Magic scrolls? Were they the undead summoning scrolls from the auction?”



“Most likely, yes.”

They’d tried to sell these to me as Satou, too, but I turned them down as well, because Spirit Magic scrolls are considered a morally gray area and might lead to unsavory rumors.

So they tried selling them to the Echigoya Company instead.

“And you put them on hold?”

“Well, purchasing Spirit Magic scrolls is seen as taboo, so we wanted to get your permission first.”

“I see. But did you have a buyer in mind if we purchased them?”

Those certainly weren’t the kind of thing we could use at the company.

“Yes, Viscount Pendragon collects scrolls.”

“So, you’re trying to win his favor?”

“No, if anything, he’s already done plenty of favors for us. I hoped we could return it a little.”

Huh? When did I do the company favors, again?

“I see. I’ll allow the purchase. The final decision is up to you.”

Since I’m really not a fan of horror, I don’t particularly want to get mixed up in controlling the undead with Spirit Magic.

I do get plenty of use from the Spirit Magic spell Bonecraft, though.

“Are the other materials in the storehouses, too?”

“Yes. Anything that requires cold storage is in storehouse number two.”

I had them bulk-purchase a lot of ingredients we were running low on, like grains and seasonings. This sort of thing looks a lot less unusual when a company is making the purchase as opposed to an individual.

I also ordered plenty of supplies that aren’t very widely circulated, like coffee beans from the Saga Empire, and items that aren’t sold in normal stores, like high-quality Ohmi beef. Starting a company really was a great idea.

“As for the mementos Viscount Pendragon requested, we’ve found a home

for the last one. It was deemed to belong to a family member of Countess Kageus, so we delivered it to their royal capital estate.”

“Good work.”

The mementos in question were items we found on the sugar route on drifting or sunken ships.

I put in a request as Satou to the Echigoya Company to return them discreetly, since it would’ve been more of a pain to do it myself. Any gifts of thanks from the owners would be used for philanthropic purposes after a handling fee went to the company.

“But did we really have to leave out Viscount Pendragon’s name, I wonder?”

“That was a condition of his request, right?”

“Well, yes... I still feel guilty, though. It’s as if we’ve robbed him of a perfect chance to make positive connections with all manner of nobles and taken all the credit for ourselves.”

“Don’t worry about it, Manager.”

I didn’t want to go making connections that might result in more marriage proposals.

“If he wanted that sort of thing, he wouldn’t have asked us to keep his name private.”

“...Of course.”

While the manager still didn’t look satisfied, Tifaleeza moved onto the next subject with more papers in hand.

“Lord Kuro, His Excellency the Prime Minister has approached us about hiring a few new personnel.”

“What kind of personnel?”

“Well, erm...” Eluterina hesitated.

Tifaleeza supplied the answer. “Phantom Thief Pippin and Shadow Thief Sharururuun.”

I’d had run-ins with Pippin as Kuro, and Sharururuun as Satou. I caught Pippin

when he stole the Prayer Ring from the auction house, and apprehended Sharururuun when she tried to steal the Dragon's Eye in the royal castle. Both were turned over to Shiga Kingdom authorities and ultimately sentenced to be slaves, or so I thought.

"Thieves? How would we use them at the company?"

If anything, I would think the prime minister would have more use for them in his intelligence-gathering agency.

"His Excellency suggested that they could be of use gathering information for Sir Nanashi the Hero or for undertaking various handiwork."

Fair enough; we were short on that kind of talent. But I didn't think such strong-willed individuals would be easy to manage. I'd rather just handle things with Space Magic and my stupid amount of skills than take on more unnecessary labor.

"Sir Nanashi has no need for such things."

"They could help us in other ways, too, like gathering information when we look into opening more branches, or with their connections with criminal guilds."

"If you have a use for them within the company, fine. But they're quick on their feet. Don't let them near any confidential information."

"Understood, sir. But there was one condition for hiring slaves..."

"A condition?"

"Pippin and Sharururuun each had one request."

"What is it?"

"They said they would only talk about it when they meet you, Lord Kuro."

"All right."

I was a little curious anyway. I could go meet with them once I finished my business at the Echigoya Company and had picked up the materials I purchased.

I checked on the progress of the farming village and mines we were developing and got research reports from the young Japanese reincarnation Aoi

and his eccentric master Professor Jahado.

“Leave it to Professor Jahado. He’s already working on a new prototype?”

“Yes, and his assistant Aoi is also developing something called a ‘drone’ using the coaxial skypower engine.”

That wasn’t surprising for a Japanese reincarnation.

However, I hoped he would develop more items for everyday use, like soap dispensers, instead of the kind of technology that might be used for military purposes.

Since I’d already told him about the technologies that the gods forbade in this world, which I heard about from the reincarnations who lived in the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum, I’d hopefully prevented the worst-case scenario. Still, researchers have a tendency to be motivated by curiosity. Maybe I should set up a system of restrictions to keep him in check.

As for the requests of the two thieves, Sharururuun’s was to rescue her younger brother, who’d been taken hostage by a criminal guild, while Pippin wanted vengeance against the villainous noble who abused and then killed his older sister.

I was able to track down both parties in no time using my map search. I rescued the little brother right away, physically destroying the criminal guild while I was at it, then uncovered the noble’s evil deeds and had him destroyed socially.

When I told them as much the next morning, both the thieves and the little brother were a little more grateful than I would have liked. Thanking me for doing a side job is all well and good, but I’d prefer they didn’t swear their undying loyalty to me with such intensely serious expressions.

I told them to obey the Echigoya Company managers in my stead; no doubt Eluterina and Tifaleeza would put the former thieves to work in no time. I designated Manager Eluterina as their official master.



“Why must people fight, I wonder...?”

Standing on the veranda of Duke Vistall's manor, gazing up at the night sky and giving off a wistful air, was the duke's youngest daughter Somienna.

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

"Wh-who's there?!"

I responded to her from the shadows, and Miss Somienna warily put her hand on her dagger.

"Good evening. Lovely sky tonight."

"Sir Hero...!"

To my relief, she seemed to remember me from my help defending against the attack on their home.

I tried to meet with her as Satou, but my request to meet with her was rejected because Duke Vistall had just departed from the royal capital with the second squadron to quash the rebellion in their duchy.

"What brings you here?"

"Eh, a friend of mine was worried about you. He asked if I could come check in on you, even if you just wanna complain to someone."

"A friend...? Ah, of course."

Miss Somienna crossed her arms, thinking in silence.

"Would you be able to stop a war, Sir Hero?"

"I don't get involved in conflicts between people."

As much as I would've liked to help her out, I didn't want to stick my nose into a place where even a hardened warrior might develop PTSD. Even with skills like "Psychic Resistance" and "Fear Resistance," I couldn't stand to witness such a bloody battle.

"Yes, of course...in that case, could you perhaps deliver a letter to my elder brother, Torriel? Surely a kind soul like him will stop this needless fighting."

"Sure. That I can definitely handle."

Personally, I doubted that her gentlehearted wish would get through to

someone who was willing to try to take the life of his own father to fulfill his ideals. Still, hopefully it would at least make her feel better.

I waited for Miss Somienna to finish writing her letter, then put it away in my Item Box, complete with her signature ribbon.

“Got it. I’ll make sure this gets to your brother, don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Sir Hero.”

I gently wiped away the tears that quivered at the edges of her eyes, then took off into the night sky with a jaunty wave.

Looking down, I saw her gazing after me even after I was probably out of sight.

Maybe I should make a little effort to help bring an end to this conflict once I took care of my business in Yowork Kingdom.



“Thank you for coming all this way to see us off, Your Highness.”

“It’s the least I can do as your apprentice. I’ll keep researching new subjects until you return to the royal capital.”

On the day of our departure, Princess Sistina came to our royal capital manor to say her farewells, accompanied by her two guardian maids and the Sakura Protector, Miss Athena.

“Misanaria of Bolenan! I swear you won’t beat me again next time.”

“Mm. Okay.”

Mia brushed off Athena’s challenge with a deadpan expression.

“My dear Karina, be sure to win Sir Satou’s favor no matter what.”

“H-he’s already turned me down once, you know...”

“Don’t be so faint of heart! So what if you’ve been turned down a single time?! With that flawless face and body of yours, you should be able to sway any boy his age easily. Keep going after him, and even Sir Satou will fall head over heels sooner or later.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Princess Menea’s whispered encouragements to Miss Karina.

Karina’s magical bust certainly is powerful enough to send me head over heels, literally if not figuratively.

We’ve got lots of other visitors, too.

Some sculptors from the studio had come to see Tama off.

“It’s not official yet, but your statue won the judges’ special award in that competition.”

“Oh, très bieeeen?”

That was impressive. We’d have to celebrate later.

“Young master, this is from our managers.”

“And this one’s from all of us employees.”

Louna, the noble girl who rode on a stone wolf, and the redheaded Neru had come on behalf of the Echigoya Company.

“Thank you, Miss Louna, Miss Neru. Tell Manager Eluterina and the others that Satou sends his heartfelt thanks.”

“I’ll let them know.”

“You got it!”

I could tell that the wrapped-up package contained the three scrolls I’d discussed with them as Kuro. Maybe I’d keep them in Storage unless I needed them.

Neru also gave me some wrapped-up pastries and deep-fried sakura salmon bones. They’d make a perfect snack for our journey.

Once we’d said most of our good-byes, it was time to for us to pile into the new armored carriage from the Ministry of Tourism and three other borrowed carriages.

“All right, we’re off.”

Noticing that Hikaru looked sad, I called out to her again before I got on

board.

“I’ll call you later tonight.”

“Okay. I hope you have a safe journey.”

“Thanks. I hope you’re able to meet your Ichirou Suzuki, too, Hikaru.”

“...Yeah.”

Once I was sure her expression had brightened a little, I got into the carriage.

As hard as it was to leave everyone, we waved and went on our way.

“Miss Miaaaa! Miss Arisaaaa!”

The magic school students, teachers, and even the principal who all admired Mia and Arisa were waiting near the south gate of the royal capital to see us off.

Pochi’s and Tama’s bestie and henchmen were there, too.

Once they’d all said their good-byes to each other, we reluctantly set the carriages moving again.

“It’s a departure song.”

Mia closed her eyes and listened to the melody playing from a distance.

Atop a tower on the outer gates, a group of master musicians was playing a farewell tune for Mia and all of us.

This made for a very auspicious exit. Many citizens of the royal capital watched us go by with fascination.

“Miss Luluuu! Miss Nanaaaa!”

“Sherin...!”

“Pupil Sherin, continue training until we meet again, I declare.”

Miss Sherin came running after the trundling carriages, waving frantically. She must have run all the way here to see us off.

“Pochi, Tama!”

“Miss Pochiii! Miss Tamaaa!”

“Bestiie!”

“Let’s meet again, henchmen, sirs!”

Tama and Pochi leaned out the window, waving to the young henchmen tripping over themselves to chase the carriage, as well as to Miss Cyna, who was being carried by a brawny knight running along beside them.

Finally, the carriage picked up speed, and we left the children behind as we took to the main road.

It’s always hard to part with people you’ve grown close to, but we can come back and visit anytime, and we’ll meet new friends on our travels, too. Rather than mourning a good-bye, I think it’s better to enjoy the journey so you have fun stories to share with them when you meet again.

The gentle spring sunlight warmed our spirits, promising a fun journey ahead.

[Return to Labyrinth City](#)

Satou here. Optimization and efficiency are important to any working adult in the business world, but when your boss is big on cutting costs, it can be suffocating. If you ask me, a good work-life balance is the real key to good productivity...

“It’s been a long time since we traveled by carriage like this.”

We had just left the royal capital, divided into four horse-drawn carriages.

“Master, I’ve been wondering why we left through the south gate. I thought we were heading straight to Labyrinth City?”

I guess I didn’t explain this to the others yet.

“We’re going by carriage to a town to the south called Mimani; then we’ll go downstream by boat to the city at the branching part of the river.”

“Traveling downstream, huh? Sounds like fun.”

I was curious to try this method myself after hearing about it at Mrs. Litton’s salon party. We’d mostly traveled by air or teleportation between Labyrinth City and the royal capital thus far.

As we discussed this, our carriages arrived at the lakeside town of Mimani.

We sent the borrowed carriages back toward the capital, and I had Arisa store the golem horses and armored carriage from the ministry in a subdimension created by her Space Magic spell Garage while Karina and company weren’t looking.

“Lake.”

“It’s a wellness resort, sir!”

“Cyna told uuus.”

The town of Mimani was close to the royal capital and served as a resort

destination for nobles and other wealthy clientele.

When Pochi and Tama came here on their preschool field trip, Marquis Kelten's daughter Cyna told them about the resort.

"Wow. You can tell from how nice the town is that it's a resort."

"Yes, Arisa. The tiny flowers hanging on the verandas are very cute, I report."

"The breeze from the waterfront is so nice and cool."

Arisa, Nana, and Lulu seemed very taken with the town.

"Huit likes the spinny-spin!"

"That is a windmill, I report."

"I wish to see it up close, I declare."

Several of Nana's sisters, led by the youngest, Huit, took off in the direction of the windmill at the center of town.

"Ah! Stop right there, all of you!"

The eldest sister, Adin, hurried off to stop them.

Seems like the sensible member of the group always gets the short end of the stick.

Watching the sisters sprint away, I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to let Adin know there was nothing to worry about.

"Look at all those little boats docked around the edge of the lake."

"Fishing boooats?"

"They catch lots of fish, sir!"

Tama and Pochi proudly responded to Liza's observation.

"They must serve delicious seafood in this town, I say."

"Can't wait for dinner, huh, Lady Karina?"

Karina and her guardian maid Erina looked eager.

"That's really all you two have to say about this beautiful scenery...?"

The newbie maid shook her head wryly at the conversation between her

master and the senior maid.

I think having a healthy appetite is a good thing, though.

“I’m surprised they served trout, not sakura salmon.”

“Mister Trout was tasty, too, sir!”

“Oui, ouiii?”

“It was delicious, of course,” Arisa reassured the indignant Pochi and Tama.

The restaurant, which I’d been told at the salon was the best in town, lived up to its reputation.

“The grilled fish was delicious, of course, but I especially enjoyed the rich, buttery meunière.”

“Yes, that was exquisite.”

Liza nodded in agreement with Lulu.

“Tria wants to know how to make meunière!”

“Let’s make it together when we get to Labyrinth City.”

“Yes, Lulu. Tria is looking forward to it!”

The third sister, Tria, seemed thrilled about her promise with Lulu.

“Grilled mushroom, yummy.”

“Yes, Mia. The dessert was delicious, too, I report.”

“That grilled apple was on par with Lulu’s or Satou’s cooking, I must say.”

“Mm, agreed.”

“Huit can eat sweets forever, I declare!”

The other sisters all nodded in agreement with the youngest of their number.

The extravagant cuisine here owed much of its deliciousness to fresh ingredients and local specialties like Ohmi butter and Lalagi sugar.

Since everyone seemed to like it so much, I decided to stock up on Lake Mimani’s jasper trout and Ohmi butter before we left town.



“We spent so much time at the market that I thought we weren’t going to make it.”

“Yeah, we did cut it close.”

Still, even if we hadn’t made it in time, we could’ve just stayed in Mimani for a night.

Although the boats technically carried only eight passengers, we were able to fit into two, since the youngest kids were so small.

Nana and her sisters were on the second boat, while the rest of us squeezed into the first.

“Mister Captain, do you fight with that pole, sir?”

“Nah, monsters hardly ever show up in this river. This pole’s for pushing the boat along or changing its direction, like a rudder.”

“Très bieeen?”

Our captain answered Pochi’s questions cheerfully.

In the boat behind us, a younger captain was turning bright red as he answered even more curious questions from Huit and the other sisters.

“I could get used to these relaxing riverboat rides.”

“Mm, elegant.”

Traveling downstream was a good choice. The breeze felt great, too.

“Ah! I see fish, sir!”

“Let’s catch ’eeem?”

“You’re liable to fall in if you lean over the side like that, little missies.”

“We’re fiiine?”

“Exactly, sir! We won’t fall in, sir.”

“You mustn’t stress the captain like that, you two.”

Liza dragged Pochi and Tama back to their seats.

Incidentally, Karina tried to lean over the side, too, but I quickly signaled her

maids to stop her. That could only have ended badly.

“We’ll be entering the rapids soon, so grab on to the handrails or the safety ropes, please. You’ll want to hold your little ones tight there, too. There’s waterproof cloth under the benches if you’re worried about getting wet.”

Judging by the captain’s warnings, this riverboat ride was about to get a lot less elegant.

“Mm, hold.”

“Mia, no fair hogging him!”

“Halfsies.”

Uh, I’m pretty sure sitting on either side of me would be safer than both of you squeezing onto my lap...

When Tama tried to join in on the turf war taking place on my legs, Liza held her firmly until she gave up. Her pouty face with her ears pressed down was adorable, though.

“Here come the rapids!”

The captain smoothly guided the boat through the churning white water.

“Eeeeeek!”

Each time the ship veered to one side or the other with a splash of the paddle, the girls shrieked, and delighted screams rang out whenever water splashed over the sides.

I thought about using Wind Magic or Practical Magic to block the splashes, then decided that this was part of the fun of this downstream ride. We could always use magic to dry our clothes off afterward.



“Aaaah, that was fun!”

To my surprise, that exclamation came from Lulu, not Arisa.

Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks flushed. I bet she’d love a roller coaster or drop tower ride in a modern-day amusement park.

“Again! Pochi wants to ride the rapids again, sir!”

“Tama, toooo, one more tiiiime?”

“I’d love to do that again sometime, too.”

“You’re a tough cookie, newbie.”

“Once was enough for me, thanks. My head is spinning.”

Tama, Pochi, and the newbie seemed to have enjoyed the rapids as much as Lulu.

While Karina looked like she’d had fun, too, she’d gripped the handrail so tightly that she snapped it and nearly went overboard in surprise.

Surprisingly, Erina and Arisa had apparently had their fill.

“There weren’t any monsters on the riverbank, but I did see a fair amount of goats and grizzly bears. There were plenty of fish in the shade, too. It might be fun to travel alongside the river sometime.”

Liza had used her exceptionally sharp vision to observe the local prey animals. I should’ve expected no less.

I had fun, too; it might be nice to invite Hikaru and some other friends from the royal capital on a ride sometime.

About a half hour after the rapids, we reached the wharf, where we split into stagecoaches and headed for the crossroads city, Kelton.

There, we stayed in a nobles’ inn for the night. The next morning, we rode golem horses made with Earth Magic and disguised as regular horses all the way to Labyrinth City. The golem horses were incredibly fast, since they never get tired.



“We’re heeere?”

“It feels like ages since we last saw this place.”

When we arrived at Labyrinth City, we entered through the nobles’ gate in the east.

“You can smell the meat skewers from here, sir!”

“I need to greet the viceroy. The rest of you are free to go wherever you like.”

As Pochi sniffed the air eagerly, I grinned and gave everyone free rein until dinner.

Of course, it would be rude to go greet the viceroy in my dust-and dirt-covered travel clothes. I planned to head to the mansion and get cleaned up before the visit.

“Ah! It’s the young master!”

“Welcome back, young master!”

As we proceeded down the mazelike paths of Labyrinth City, townspeople and fellow explorers spotted us here and there and waved excitedly.

“Welcome home, sir.”

Since I’d sent the newbie ahead to let them know we’d arrived, the head maid, Miss Miteruna, and the gaggle of younger maids of our mansion were all ready to greet us.

“Pochi’s going to say hello to Effie and Rye, sir.”

“Tama will say hi to Runny and Saur?”

Pochi and Tama set off to the stables to see our horses and runosaurs.

“Mister Viscount!”

“Welcome hooome!”

The kids from the orphanage came running over, presumably tipped off by the ones who spotted us when we first arrived, practically tripping over themselves to welcome us back.

“Young masterrr!”

This time, we were waylaid by the Pendra kids, graduates of the explorers' school. The ones I didn't recognize must have been current students. Behind them were some of their teachers: Mr. Kajiro, Ayaume, and Iruna and Jena of the Lovely Wings.

"Sir Satou!"

"Knight—no, *Viscount* Pendragon. Congratulations on your promotion."

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. We must celebrate thy promotion to viscount."

Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom and Baronet Dyukeli's daughter Mary-Ann also came to greet us. Behind them was the viceroy's third son, Gerits; Baron Tokey's son, Luram; and the other boys.

"Thank you very much. Congratulations on formally coming of age, too, young ladies."

The two girls smiled, looked slightly shy.

Soon, some of our neighbors and contracted farmers swarmed over to greet us, too. By the time we were caught up, the sun had set.

Greeting the viceroy would have to wait until the next day.

I had Miss Miteruna send a letter to him since it would be rude to show up without an appointment.

While I was hurrying through some work in my study, I heard the kids outside having a barbecue.

"Arisaaa! I learned all my letters!"

"Arisa, I learned my arithmetic, too!"

The older kids from the orphanage were telling Arisa about their accomplishments in the time we'd been away.

"Heh-heh, I even learned how to do chants!"

Now that's impressive.

This was a different girl, not the boy who'd been using Everyday Magic to flip girls' skirts when we left Labyrinth City.

Since they were working so hard, maybe I should send the kids with especially good grades to study at the academy in the royal capital.

“Maybe having some kids around would make Hikaru less lonely, too?”

Mumbling to myself, I wrote down some ideas on a random memo pad.

“Masterrrr! Hurry, hurryyyy! We’re running out of meat!”

“Coming,” I called back to Arisa, and left the study.

I sent out a messenger to invite Zena and the rest of the Seiryuu County folks to the barbecue, but I was told they were away on a mission to the labyrinth. That was too bad. I’d have to invite them over another day.

Later, the guildmaster and some of our other drinking buddies showed up with bottles in hand, while General Erthal snuck in incognito, accompanied by the fox officer and his commander. The guildmaster eventually cut a little too loose and started doing party tricks with Fire Magic, forcing her secretary, Miss Ushana, and counselor Cebelkea to stop her; meanwhile, the fox officer misspoke and got bonked on the head repeatedly by his captain. Overall, it was a very lively evening indeed.



“Sir Pendragon, congratulations on your promotion.”

I was visiting the viceroy’s palace, where I was reunited with the former Count Poputema, formerly known as the green-clad noble.

Unlike when he’d been controlled by a demon’s Spirit Magic, he looked like an ordinary noble, and no longer said “indeed” or wore strange green makeup.

“Your recovery is cause for celebration, too, Your Excellency.”

“Indeed, this, too, is thanks to the viceroy and his wife for purchasing the elixir, and in fact to you yourself for acquiring it from the floormaster.”

The last time we met, he’d lost the lower half of his body in the incident with the demonic Ludaman and was being kept alive by a magic contraption in the viceroy’s mansion. Now, thanks to the elixir the viceroy’s wife won in the auction, his health had nearly recovered.

“Why don’t you two have a seat, hmm?”

At the prompting of the smiling viceroy's wife, Marchioness Ashinen, we sat down in the comfortable sofas of her parlor.

"Perhaps the topic of today's tea party ought to be your miraculous promotion from honorary knight to viscount, Sir Pendragon?"

"There's not much I can say, since it was all decided without my involvement..."

Still, I told her everything I knew, after that disclaimer.

"Oh, my. So you were originally meant to be promoted to baron?"

"That's quite impressive. I suppose His Majesty must have decided that a baronet or baron would be insufficient honors and chose on his own to make you a viscount instead. As far as I know, such a thing has never been done before in all recorded history."

"I've certainly never heard of such a thing."

If these two well-informed nobles didn't know of any precedent, this must be an extremely rare case, all right.

They asked me what I had done in front of the king; I told them all I could think of was sparring and training with the Shiga Eight Swordsmen alongside my companions at the Holy Knights' barracks, helping fend off the monsters that invaded during the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony, and so on.

I left out anything Kuro and Nanashi had done behind the scenes, since those weren't technically "Satou's" accomplishments.

"I see. In that case, I suppose it's natural that the king would have such high hopes for your future after witnessing such things."

"Why not put your name in the ring for the Shiga Eight candidates? I'd imagine that you and Lady Kishreshigarza would be more than qualified, no?"

I brushed off the viceroy's wife's half-joking suggestion with a smile.

A position like being a protector of the Shiga Kingdom would only hinder my dream of traveling around the world.

I'll leave that kind of thing to people with more patriotism and ambition.

“Besides, the prime minister has appointed me Vice-Minister of Tourism. I’d like to focus on those duties for the time being.”

The viceroy’s wife and Poputema exchanged glances that seemed to say “Ah yes, *that*.”

“Perhaps that is a better role for you, Sir Pendragon.”

“Given that you have mended the notorious rift between our Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, I am sure you’ll be perfectly up to the task.”

“That reminds me, Ema wrote to me in a letter that you also managed to befriend the famously fickle and hard-to-please Prince Smartith of Blybrogha Kingdom. However did you manage a feat like that?”

As entertainingly as I could manage, I related the tale of the treasure of Blybrogha Kingdom that Shadow Thief Sharururuun stole.

The story was mostly well-received, although I noticed they looked askance when I mentioned how much I enjoyed the cuisine of the leprechaun kingdom. I guess it’s a little strange for most people.

“Since you’ve been appointed Vice-Minister of Tourism and all, will you be leaving us for the royal capital again?”

“No, not for the moment. Once I get my new companions all set up for training here, we’ll be traveling around to various nations for a while.”

“Traveling, eh...? Well, if you go to the western part of the continent, be sure to gather up enough information beforehand so that you won’t get caught up in any conflict. The area of Parion Province is especially prone to ongoing strife. They use the authority of Goddess Parion to arbitrate conflicts between their neighbors, but the other nations do not think very highly of their actions. Be extra careful if you choose to visit there.”

I made a note in my memo tab about former Count Poputema’s warning.

Since our current destination was the collection of small nations in the north of Shiga Kingdom, it would probably be a while before we went sightseeing in Parion Province; still, better safe than sorry.

“Will Lady Karina be joining you on your journey?”

“No, she intends to stay in Labyrinth City and continue training.”

While we were on the subject, I asked the viceroy’s wife to look after Miss Karina and Nana’s sisters after we left, to which she readily agreed.

Next, I told her I wanted to invest the same amount of money she’d spent on the elixir into the betterment of Labyrinth City, only for her to scold me for being so distant.

She must have mistaken it as an offer of thanks for her looking after my friends because of the order of the conversation.

Fortunately, she accepted my investment once I cleared up the misunderstanding.

The money I invested would be used for things like expanding the experimental farms and giving loans to up-and-coming artisans and young businesspeople. I was starting to feel like a venture capitalist.



After my morning visit with the viceroy’s wife, I took Nana’s sisters to the west guild.

“We wish to register, I report!”

The youngest sister, Huit, marched up confidently to the counter.

“Are those new members of the young master’s crew?”

“Damn, what a bunch of babes.”

“Are you morons blind or what? They all look exactly like the Shield Princess!”

“That many Shield Princesses? Are they gonna take on a floormaster all by themselves or what?!”

The explorers in the hall all whispered about the sisters.

When the attendant offered their explorers badges on a plate, Huit tilted her head.

“Why not a wooden badge? I inquire.”

“Satou vouched for you gals’ strength at last night’s banquet. So I don’t mind

starting you out with bronze badges. The garnet badges you'll have to earn with regular delivery of cores like anyone else."

The guildmaster personally gave Huit her bronze badge.

She must have gone out of her way to get them ready after I told her at the barbecue that I was planning to register the sisters as explorers.

"Thank you for your kind consideration, Guildmaster."

"Huh, this one speaks normally. Well, make sure nobody gets hurt, all right?"

The guildmaster smiled at Adin, the eldest.

Since the homunculi sisters were raring to go into the labyrinth right away, I put Nana and Mia in charge of guiding them. The beastfolk girls had already gone in with Miss Karina and company that morning.

Once we all went into the labyrinth, Arisa and I went off on our own.

"Should we start in area eleven as usual?"

"No, that area's been crowded lately. Let's go somewhere less populated, like area nine."

We were discussing where to set up a teleport mirror. I figured it would allow Nana's sisters to easily get into the deeper parts of the labyrinth.

"Wow, not a soul in sight! This place sure is unpopular."

"That's why I chose it."

We used Arisa's Space Magic to take a shortcut straight to the border between area four and area nine. From there, I carried Arisa and traveled via "Skyrunning."

"Maybe around here?"

"Let's go a little farther in."

On my map, I saw a perfect little spot in an upcoming dead-end passage. I could tell it would be perfect for discreetly setting up a teleport mirror.

We got there in no time with my "Skyrunning."

Then I used the Earth Magic spell Create Stone Object to create a little

stairwell invisible from the main path.

“I don’t know how you find these places.”

“You should be able to do the same with your Space Magic, you know.”

“Whaaat? I wouldn’t investigate such a complicated area unless I absolutely had to.”

I took out the teleport mirror as I chatted with Arisa.

“Whoa, it’s huge!”

Arisa exclaimed in surprise at the size of the mirror.

Unlike the more advanced ones I used to connect our royal capital manor to our secret base, this teleport mirror was much larger, and could only connect to specifically set locations. In exchange, it cost less mana to operate, and the large size discouraged thieves from stealing it, handily offsetting the disadvantages.

I made a set of three of these mirrors to connect three different areas of the labyrinth.

In front of the teleport mirror, I used Create Stone Object to make a stone pillar with written instructions for using it. At Arisa’s suggestion, I made the text sort of riddle-like to give the whole thing a very mysterious air.

“How are we going to get to the next teleport point?”

“We can just use Return. It’s a spot I’ve used for hunting before.”

I’d chosen each teleport destination in places with lots of monsters that weren’t too dangerous. They were populated by monsters with levels in the tens, twenties, and thirties, respectively.

We briskly moved from place to place, and Arisa helped me set up more teleport mirrors that would connect to the first one. The mirrors were operated by inserting a core in the slot I’d attached to each one.

“Will anyone else have access to these besides Karina and Nana’s sisters?”

“Yeah, I plan to tell Miss Zena and the Pendra kids about it, too.”

“Even the soldiers from Seiryuu County?”

“Of course. I’m hoping to open it up to any interested explorers in the long run.”

For now, I planned to limit usage to people who carried a particular item.

As long as I registered holders of the item to the list of permissions to operate the teleport mirrors, it could be anything from a blue ribbon to a dancing frog doll.

“You don’t think this third spot will get oversaturated right away?”

“No, it’ll be fine. You can reach a neighboring area easily from here.”

There was a dangerous zone nearby where areamasters sometimes passed through. However, they were all exceptionally large, so it should be easy enough to avoid them as long as people weren’t being completely loud and stupid.

While I told Arisa all this, I went around setting up hunting ground facilities in each teleport destination like the one I made for Zena’s team.

That was enough work for one day. I decided to tell the sisters and Karina about it tomorrow.



The next day, Nana and the beastfolk girls took Nana’s sisters into the labyrinth right away, heading in to explore the areas I’d just set up with the teleport mirrors. Karina and company joined them, too.

Since maze frogs were the mainstay of the level ten area, we’d probably be having deep-fried frog for dinner that night.

Because Zena and friends were still exploring the labyrinth as well, I decided to go visit Hikaru in the royal capital to talk to her about the possibility of the kids studying abroad.

When I teleported to Mitsukuni Manor, Hikaru greeted me with a smile.

I had my hood pulled down over my eyes, since the maids were present, too.

“Ichirooooou!”

For some reason, she’d gone back to calling me “Ichirou” instead of “Satou.”

Once Hikaru sent the maids away, I removed my hood.

“What’s going on? It’s only been a few days—did you miss me that much already?”

“I wanted to bring you some food, plus I’ve got a little idea to discuss.”

“Mimani Lake jasper trout! Oh, this stuff is the best!” Hikaru exclaimed, then paused. “What’s the idea?”

“I told you we’re running an orphanage in Labyrinth City, right? I was hoping some of the kids there with good grades could study abroad at the royal academy. Do you think you’d be able to look after them, maybe even be a dorm mother?”

“Oh yes, absolutely! I’d love to be a dorm mother!”

She seemed very enthusiastic about the idea. If anything, I felt a little bad about leaving her here in the royal capital.

Since she tended to get lonely easily in spite of her seemingly carefree attitude, I bet she was looking forward to taking care of the kids.

“I was thinking of using part of my royal capital manor as the dorm. Maybe I should rent someplace closer to the academy instead, though?”

“Hmm, maybe? The Pendragon house is a little far.”

“I’ll send a letter to the Echigoya Company asking them to make arrangements, then.”

“Oh, I can do that much myself.”

Hikaru made a grabby-hands gesture, so I wrote a quick letter and gave it to her, along with money for the estimated budget.

“I know! I’ll have to get an apron with little chirping chicks on it, and a bamboo broom!”

That’d be a landlady, not a dorm mother.

Keeping my comment to myself, I instead gave her an apron and broom from Storage.

Hikaru has a tendency to make references to famous old manga at the most

random times.

I think she said once that she picked it up from her aunt?

“Wow, did you come prepared or what?”

“Nana likes those aprons.”

Since Nana loves anything with baby birds on it, I had several such aprons in Storage.

I stuck around for a little afternoon tea with Hikaru. Then, since she still seemed reluctant to part, I accompanied her on a stroll around the royal capital. I wore a disguise mask, since just a hood wouldn't be enough to hide my identity, though.

Still, if this was enough to alleviate her loneliness, I'd have to visit more often.



“Master, we will be back, I bravely declare.”

“Tria too! Tria will do her best.”

Huit, Tria, and the other sisters looked resolute.

On the third morning since our return from the royal capital, Nana's sisters were departing for their labyrinth training adventure under Mr. Kajiro's guidance.

Karina was supposed to join them, but she wound up staying behind because she got word that a package had arrived for her from Muno County at the viceroy's residence.

On the upside, this meant that she was able to join us in recreating recipes from the book of legendary court cuisine that Zena gave me when she returned from the labyrinth that day.

Karina seemed especially delighted by the cuisine.

The dishes we made that day included dragon steak, behemoth and mandragora stew, and Phoenix salad, all of which were utterly delicious.

Of course, I also delivered those dishes to Nana's siblings in the labyrinth, Hikaru, my beloved Miss Aaze of Bolenan Forest, and even Rei and Yuuneia on

Paradise Island, all of whom gave them rave reviews.

“Master, the chef we requested to teach the cooking class accepted our offer. Could you look at the recipes for the class later?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Master, we were contacted about the possibility of offering the woodworking class at the orphanage to retired explorers as well, I report.”

“Fine by me, as long as the teachers are okay with it. Let me know if they need money or a bigger location.”

“Satou, music class.”

“It’s already in the works. I made a soundproof room in the same building as Lulu’s cooking class and put in orders for instruments and sheet music.”

“Young master, Sir Skopi of the Mud Scorpions has sent an inquiry about the job training institution planned for the factory town area.”

“I’ll write a reply right away. Keep the messenger on standby, please.”

I answered one rapid-fire request after another.

There were projects in the labyrinth itself, too, not just in the city.

“Master, Huit wants a runosaur, I declare.”

“What for?”

“To travel within the labyrinth, I report. It would be convenient for scouting, I declare.”

I thought about Huit’s request.

Runosaurs might actually be a good fit for labyrinth use, since they can travel long distances and have strong night vision.

And there aren’t many places to use runosaurs within Labyrinth City, so they’ve only been running around in the fields and such.

“All right. You can try it out. If the runosaur doesn’t want to go in, though, that’s that. Okay?”

“Yes, Master. The runosaur did not seem to mind at all, I report.”

Apparently, she'd already tried it.

I gave permission as long as she made sure to be safe.

With all this going on, our weeklong stay in Labyrinth City went by in a flash.

Before we knew it, the time came for us to depart.

"Sir Satou, this is a safe-travel charm I acquired at Parion Temple."

"Thank you, Miss Zena."

Zena came to see us off and gave me a protective charm.

"We plan to be in Labyrinth City for a full year, but we may be sent back to Seiryuu City temporarily next month to give an interim report."

"Got it. I'll make sure I stop by the castle or the barracks if we're near Seiryuu City, then."

Currently, the plan was to go to Yowork Kingdom, then wander the small central nations for a while, and finally go investigate Hero Summoning circles in the Saga Empire. Still, depending on where Zena's marker was, it might not be bad to stop by Seiryuu City, too.

We had a lot of friends there, anyway. I'm sure Pochi and Tama would love to see Yuni at the Gatefront Inn, Mia could visit Nadi and the boss at the general store, and Liza probably had old friends she'd like to see, too.

"Satou, take this."

"Wait..." I looked at the object Karina handed me in surprise. "Isn't this the demon-sealing bell?"

"Yes, Mr. Raka suggested I should lend it to you in case you run into demons on your journey."

"You may have no need of it, Sir Satou, but you ought to have a means of dispelling demons if they possess innocent people."

It certainly would be convenient to have a demon remover.

I'd already taken out all the demons near Labyrinth City, so they probably wouldn't show up here for a while.

“Thank you very much, Lady Karina. And you, too, Raka.”

I bowed my head appreciatively and reached for the bell.

Suddenly, Karina grabbed my hand and pulled me in.

“Huh...?”

I felt something soft on my skin.

For just a moment, Karina had kissed my cheek.

“Guilty!”

“Hey! What was that all about?!”

The iron-wall duo pulled Karina away.

“I-it is simply a good-luck charm for the journey, I say.”

Miss Karina turned bright red as she made her excuse.

“Tama tooo?”

“Pochi wants one, too, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pressed toward their friend.

“Nice one, Lady Karina!”

“Aww, I didn’t think she’d go through with it.”

“Come on, Erina, don’t sulk. If you’re that jealous, why not give Sir Viscount a hug?”

I overheard Karina’s maids having a hushed argument.

“Go on, Zenacchi! Quit dawdling and kiss him on the other cheek!”

“Yeah! You gotta step up or you’ll fall behind!”

“Hang on a minute, you two...”

“...Right!”

Spurred on by her comrades Lilio and Lou, Zena steeled herself, ran over to me, and actually did plant a kiss on my other cheek.

For a moment, our eyes ended up meeting.

“...It’s a good-luck charm.”

Looking away, she repeated Karina’s excuse with a mumble.

She must have acted on the spur of the moment and gotten embarrassed after.

“All right, let’s get outta here before all the other girls try and join in!”

“Mm, hurry.”

Half-howling, Arisa gave the signal to Lulu in the coachman’s seat.

Mia did the same as she pulled me by the hand into our carriage.

“Have a safe trip, young master!”

“Be careful out there, sir!”

“May fortune favor you, Master!”

As we hurriedly set off, the crowd that had gathered to see us off all called after us cheerfully.

Zena and Karina called out my name just as loudly, waving with the best of them.

We waved back twice as hard so that they could see us even as the carriage trundled away.

Having a lively send-off like this is nice once in a while, too.

When we returned, I’d have to shower them with lots of stories from our travels, along with plenty of delicacies from all over the world.



The Barren Territory

Satou here. Different positions mean different demands and ways of thinking. I think considering other people's positions can help you figure out what you might be lacking or where the root of a misunderstanding might be, allowing you to take steps toward understanding each other.

"This area shouldn't be visible from Labyrinth City or the mountain pass watchtower, right?"

"Yeah, and it's near a side road. I'd say it's good, no?"

"All right, then I'll teleport us now."

On our way across the mountains surrounding a basin, we put the carriages away in Storage and used the Space Magic spell Return to take a shortcut to a location close to the crossroads city of Kelton. While I generally prefer to enjoy the journey, we've gone this way enough times that there probably weren't any new surprises in store.

The plan was to pass the crossroads city without stopping; take the central royal territory road north to pass through Zetts County, Lessau County, and Kageus County; then finally reach Yowork Kingdom, which had annexed Arisa and Lulu's homeland, the former Kuvork Kingdom.

"We're awfully deep in the mountains."

When we emerged from the teleport point, a partially underground building, Arisa peered around curiously.

"I put the Return slate in an area only accessible by flying so we wouldn't run into any hunters."

We were near the peak of the mountain, looking down on the distant crossroads city.

We rode the golem horses (disguised as real horses) to descend from the

mountain. On the way down, we secured some mountain birds and greenleaf boar for lunch. I'd heard that the latter tasted like delicious, non-pungent pork.

"Mountain grapes."

"Sooour?"

Mia pointed out the wild fruit, and Tama popped one into her mouth, immediately puckering up her entire face at the strong sour taste.

"Those purple ones are no good, sir. These red ones are the sweet kind, sir."

"You're right. Nice one, Pochi."

Pochi, the master of sniffing out sweets, easily picked out the ripest mountain grapes.

She always had a nose for tasty treats, just like how she found the thorn licorice back when we first started traveling.

"Let's pick some for snacks."

"Yes, let's! We can dry any leftovers into raisins."

We all enjoyed picking mountain grapes for a while, then resumed the journey once we'd gathered more than enough.

Since traveling long distances on horseback could be tiring, I pulled out a semi-floating carriage with a simple skypower engine to combat vibration and attached it to the horses. Since it carried six people, two others would remain on horseback in shifts to keep watch.

"These golem horses really are fast," Arisa remarked.

Since they didn't need to rest, and still traveled twice as fast as normal horses even while pulling a carriage, we could cover five or even ten times the usual distance in a day.

"Effie and Rye are fast, too, sir."

"Oui, oooui"

Tama and Pochi spoke up to defend our original carriage horses, who we left at our Labyrinth City mansion.

Just then, Nana approached the carriage with a report.

“Master, there are many exhausted individuals on the road, I declare.”

Sure enough, there was a crowd of skinny, tired-looking individuals walking unsteadily toward the crossroads city.

They must be refugees from Lessau County.

“Master, many of them are sick or injured as well.”

Liza chimed in from the opposite window.

Some of the people resting underneath the trees alongside the road were green in the face or wrapped in bloodied bandages.

“Satou...”

Mia and the others looked at me.

Clearly, they didn’t want to ignore people in need any more than I did.

“Let’s take an early lunch break around here, shall we?”

I stopped the carriage on the side of the road and had Lulu and Liza start preparing lunch.

Of course, we made enough not just for ourselves but also for the nearby travelers, who clearly needed nutrients. In addition to the greenleaf boars and mountain birds we’d hunted earlier, I threw in some of our huge stock of monster meat so we’d have enough for everyone.

“Mia, use magic to heal the injured, please. Nana, you guard Mia. Arisa and I will heal the sick. Pochi and Tama, you head up the road and let people know that we’re giving out food. If there’s anyone too sick or injured to move, I’d appreciate it if you could carry them here.”

Once I finished giving orders, the group all sprang into action.

Realizing that some people might not believe Tama and Pochi alone, I had Nana make announcements, too.

“Attention, highway travelers! Viscount Pendragon, vassal of Muno County, is offering free food and healing. Please gather here if you are interested, I declare.”

Nana amplified her voice as she spoke. Arisa had come up with the phrasing.

It seemed like an obvious PR stunt, but I agreed to it when she explained that it would make the people more likely to accept our reasoning.

“Will we be healing the sick with potions?” Arisa asked.

I nodded. “Most of them only have colds or are sick from exhaustion and malnutrition, so I think the potions we have on hand should be fine.”

A watered-down cure-all should be enough for the handful of exceptions.

“My daughter’s fever won’t go down.”

“Granny can’t stop coughing. Please help her, mister.”

“My son isn’t waking up...”

I handed out magic potions to all comers.

“Master, are you sure we should use so many of these?”

“Yeah, there’s plenty more where that came from.”

This would barely make a dent in my potion stock. I used a giant Transmutation Cauldron in the Ivy Manor in Labyrinth City to mass-produce potions by the barrel.

If we ran out, I could always just go back to the Ivy Manor and make more. No doubt we’d be fully replenished by morning.

“Thank ye so much, sir. My daughter’s fever finally went down. How can I possibly thank ye? All I have are these straw sandals I made to sell in town...”

“Thank you, mister, thank you! Granny stopped coughing. Haven’t seen her lookin’ so lively since I first came to the village!”

“My son opened his eyes! Thank you, sir noble. I’m so, so grateful.”

The kids and parents we’d helped heal thanked us one after another. Their accents varied, depending on where they came from.

Some of them tried to offer what little items they could spare, which I politely and appreciatively declined.

“Mommy, I’m hungry.”

“Oh, my dear child...”

With their health restored, some of the kids’ appetites returned as well.

“Larvae. There is free food this way, I declare.”

“Everyone is welcome. Please eat and restore your spirits for the rest of your journey.”

Nana and Lulu started handing out wooden bowls of stew to the hesitant crowd.

“Mmmm!”

“This is so yummy, isn’t it, Mommy?”

“I’ve never had food this good, not even at the harvest festival.”

Tears rolled down their cheeks as they dug into the stew and meat skewers.

It had probably been a while since they had anything but the most frugal of meals.

“Please take your time and eat slowly, okay? There’s plenty more for seconds.”

“We’ll hand out preserved foods for the road later. Go ahead and clean your plates for now.”

Lulu and Liza went around reassuring the masses.

Thanks to the food-drying magic tools I made, I had tons of monster meat jerky and dried kraken tentacles to go around.

In particular, the squid and octopus sea monsters that I used to make the dried kraken were enormous enough to displace more than ten thousand tons of water. Even now that they were dried out, I still had a comical amount of meat. Honestly, I kind of regretted making so much.

“You’re a compassionate man, sir. If only our own young master would think of his own people more, like you...”

“If he was that nice of a guy, we wouldn’t’a had to leave our village in the first place.”

“Where is this Muno County? We should move there instead.”

“Yessiree. I’d rather have a kindhearted lord, even if the taxes’re twice as high.”

Even if it was overly high praise, it seemed mutually beneficial if people wanted to move to the underpopulated Muno County.

“I ain’t never heard of Muno County, though, eh? It farther off than the royal capital?”

“It’s right on the other side of the Fujisan Mountains.”

“The mountains?!”

“Welp, that ain’t gonna work, what with wyrms and wyverns livin’ in them mountains.”

The brightness that had briefly lit the people’s faces went dark again.

It certainly would be difficult to emigrate from the royal capital or the western part of the Shiga Kingdom to Muno County, I supposed. Maybe I should make a large airship for that purpose?

Once the immigration was done, the Echigoya Company could use it for foreign trade.

I’d have to bring this idea up to the managers next time I went to the Echigoya Company HQ in the royal capital.

“Nothin’ ever comes that easy, eh...?”

Whoops. The mood got pretty grim while I was lost in thought.

“Muno County may be far away, but the Echigoya Company in the royal capital is also looking for immigrants to move into their new farming village.”

“A new village, eh...? My gramps did one o’ them mining villages, but it were real rough work, and folks died over winter when there weren’t enough to eat.”

A few of the older folks repeated stories they’d probably heard countless times.

“Don’t worry. This village is already built and self-sufficient.”

“Already built? What’s the catch, eh?”

Clearly, this sounded too good to be true to most of the crowd.

“There is none. Nanashi the Hero of Shiga Kingdom founded the Echigoya Company, so it does philanthropic work as well.”

“A hero, eh!”

“Well then, that’s another story!”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

Wow, heroes have serious name recognition.

That must be thanks to the previous generations of Saga Empire heroes.

“Say, I’d be a tenant farmer any day if it means we gets to eat.”

“This gives me hope that it’ll be worth it when we get to the royal capital.”

“Mm-hmm. Maybe we can make a brighter future for our kids after all.”

The young and old refugees alike had fresh fire behind their eyes as they spoke.

They’d actually be landowners, not just tenant farmers, but I didn’t correct them on this, since I doubted they’d believe me anyway.

As we continued our journey with similar acts of charity and good deeds along the way, we ultimately reached Zetts County in the northern part of the territory a little later than planned.

They didn’t appear to be taking in refugees here; would-be immigrants were detained outside the town walls.

“We’re not going to give out food here?”

“I don’t want to anger Zetts County. I’ll just donate some funds to the town temples and ask them to offer healing and charity instead.”

With that, we entered the town of Fau.

Our first stop was lunch at a restaurant where Hikaru’s and Nana’s sisters had apparently worked part-time for a while.

The little restaurant had a history that went as far back as the founding of the

kingdom. Its signature dish was fried rice, purportedly a favorite of the ancestral king Yamato, with finely shredded mandarin orange rinds. Instead of pork, the protein was provided by small goat giblets.

We ordered the fried rice lunch special, which came with sides of grilled river fish and boiled veggies.

It was fairly delicious, if not quite the same as the fried rice I remembered. The white flesh of the river fish complemented the dish well, and the egg cooked into the rice made it nice and crumbly, with the orange rinds balancing out the goat offal for a pleasant aftertaste.

Once we were good and full, we explored the street markets of Fau.

“Mandarins.”

Mia tugged on my sleeve, leading me toward a cart full of mandarin oranges.

“Let’s buy a lot while we’re here. I’ve heard Zetts County citrus are delicious.”

“Mm, agree.”

In addition to the mandarins, there were several larger varieties that reminded me of Hassaku oranges.

“Citrus seem to be this place’s only special feature.”

“Well, the buildings are a little different from those of the royal capital.”

There were a lot of one-and two-story wooden houses, probably thanks to all the forests in the surrounding area.

As we wandered around, checking out the town, we heard a commotion across the street.

“Thief! Someone stop him!”

A stall owner shook his fist as an unhealthily scrawny boy weaved his way through the crowd.

Though he was already far away from the merchant’s reach, it seemed his escape was not to succeed.

“Got you, you little brat!”

A guard who'd been slacking off at a chicken skewer stall used the butt of his spear to trip the boy, then pinned him down under a boot before he could get up.

"A boy from the slums? Throw him out of the town!"

"Yeah, kick him out!"

The merchant and his fellows all jeered at the youngster, who turned pale.

"N-not outside the town!"

"It's either that or exile, boy!"

"I'd rather be a slave than die in a ditch outside the town walls."

Is the outside of the town really that bad...?

"Master, you're not going to stick your nose into it this time?"

"Well, it's not like they're getting violent with him... I'll wait to meddle until after his punishment."

I watched as the guard dragged the boy away.

We went around and made donations to the temples of the town, which were happy to agree to offer food and healing to the poor and refugees. I donated plenty of food and potions, too.

To my surprise, several of the temples started giving out food at once. I don't know if it was because of the size of my donation or because they were already worried about the refugees and poor people, but either way, I was happy to see them taking charitable action so quickly.

"There must be orphanages, right?"

"Apparently, they're all full to bursting."

While most of the temples had their own orphanages, they were all very small, leaving many children to live on the streets. Some children were even forced to turn to crime, like the boy we saw before.

"Do you think there's any work for them?"

"According to the head priestess, there's an employment agency in the slums

that helps hire day laborers.”

However, evidently there wasn’t enough work to go around.

“If only there were some way we could make more jobs...”

“Master, what about making dried mandarin oranges?”

While I was racking my brains over Arisa’s comment, Lulu spoke up with a brilliant idea.

“Dried oranges... I wonder if anyone else is already doing it?”

“I haven’t seen any in the market so far. It looks like everyone just has regular oranges.”

Maybe that was just because fresh oranges were currently in season? Still, dried fruit would keep for a long time, and it was nice and light for travel. I bet the oranges would be really popular with explorers and sailors in Labyrinth City or a trade city, for starters.

“I imagine anyone could make them with magic tools for drying food, right?”

“If we give such expensive tools to kids, I’m afraid some nasty adults might steal them.”

“Good point...”

I looked around, and my eyes fell on a sign for the Echigoya Company.

I’d forgotten that I had the managers preparing to set up branches in various towns and cities around the Shiga Kingdom.

“Let’s get the Echigoya Company involved, since there’ll be buying and selling to do.”

“So you’re gonna leave all the hard work to someone else. Got it.”

Hey, no need to be rude. I’m starting a new venture with my business, that’s all.

“A dried fruit factory?”

“Yes, Zetts County seems to produce a lot of mandarin oranges. It should appeal to explorers and sailors, yes?”

That night, I went to the Echigoya royal capital headquarters and met with Manager Eluterina and Secretary Tifaleeza to propose the dried fruit project.

Since we'd used the food-drying magic tools to mass-produce jerky, dried kraken, and so on, I gave the Echigoya Company blueprints for a cheaper-to-produce version of the tool, as well as several prototypes.

"We'll bring the blueprints and prototypes to our magic tool providers tomorrow and get an estimate."

"Lord Kuro, I think we should run a test market somewhere to see if we can make a profit."

I agreed to Tifaleeza's proposal, suggesting that we start the trial run in Fau. It was the closest major town to the royal capital, and a major producer of the mandarin oranges.

"Fau? That's perfect. We've just received a report that we secured a building for our branch there. I'll have the team in charge of setting up the new shop test out the dried fruits there."

It would probably take about a month to get the trial up and running, but I hoped the branch managers would be able to employ a lot of the poor population in that town.

That should take care of the lack of jobs.

On top of that, I also told the pair that I was considering using a large airship to transport immigrants, with the disclaimer that this wasn't too urgent a project. I asked them to look into potential problems and lay some basic groundwork for the plan, and also suggested that we could use the airship for trade once it was done.

I feel like their faces might have stiffened a little, but I'm sure that was just my imagination.

When I returned to Fau, still dressed as Kuro, I went to visit the refugees living outside the town.

The refugee camps didn't have any bonfires or campfires. There were just tents lined up in pitch-black darkness, with refugees huddled together sleeping

inside.

“Stop! What business do you have here?!”

A group of men with sticks emerged from the shadows of the tents.

Although they were skinny, they still had strong muscles from farmwork.

“I’m a merchant. I have something I want to sell to you.”

“Ha! What kinda sick joke is that? As you can see, we’re too poor to even get into the town. Our women are too sick and exhausted to even sell their bodies. What the hell do you think you could possibly sell us?”

“Hope for the future.”

These words were borrowed from the people we helped on the highway. I thought it had a nice ring.

“Hope? There’s no place for that here! The future? Half of us are so sick we don’t even know if we’ll live to see tomorrow!”

The man’s voice rose with anger.

His shouting awoke some of the people in the tents, who peered out at us.

“Go to the royal capital. The Echigoya Company there will give you hope. You can sign up to live in their new farming village. That will give you a future.”

I used a little help from my “Persuasion” skill to address the man and the refugees behind him.

“Listen, masked man. My great-granddad worked on one o’ those settlements in Lessau County. I wasn’t alive for all that, but I heard all kinds of awful stories growin’ up. Hacking down mountains and forests to build a village sounds like hell itself. It ain’t just that the work is hard. There’s nothin’ to eat for years until you can finally grow crops, and kids and old folks die every winter of cold and hunger.”

Some of the elderly refugees we helped on the highway had said the same kind of thing.

It seems that breaking ground on a new settlement without magic is even harder than I thought.

“Not in this place. The village is already built. All that’s left is to send in people who will till the fields.”

“Like we’d believe such a wild fantasy!”

“Yeah, right!”

Okay, fair enough.

Since I didn’t start by giving out food and healing this time, I got the feeling just name-dropping the hero wouldn’t be enough to convince them.

“Let me show you, then.”

I looked around and pointed at some boulders and trees not far from the camp.

“Over there. I’ll demonstrate for you.”

I led the men to the clearing, and the other refugees rose from their beds and followed.

Even though they said they didn’t believe my story, there must have been a part of them that hoped it was true.

I stopped near the spot and used magic to create a light source, sweeping away the darkness.

“Farming.”

Pretending to chant in a low voice, I held up a magic gemstone I’d made with Create Stone Object.

After a moment, I used the Earth Magic spell Cultivation from my magic menu.

I set the range to a sixty-five-foot square and activated the spell.

“OOOOOOOH!”

The men murmured in awe, followed by the rest of the crowd.

“A f-field appeared?!”

“Even the rocks and trees turned into farmland!”

“That’s impossible! This must be an illusion! He’s trying to trick us with

magic!”

One of the men was still suspicious.

“Touch it and see for yourself.”

“Damn right I will! I’m not gonna fall for your tricks!”

Fuming, he thrust his hand into the ground of the field.

“Damn, that’s soft...and looks real fertile, too,” I heard him mutter as he held up the fistful of dirt.

Hearing this, the other men and refugees followed suit, putting their hands in the earth. They started talking urgently among themselves, inviting those who still doubted to touch the dirt as well.

Finally, most of them seemed to be convinced, and the vocal man from before came over with a crowd of the others.

They all threw themselves down in front of me.

“I’m sorry. It was only me and these two guys here who called you a fraud. The others got nothing to do with it. Please just punish us. Take the rest of ’em to this village you told us about. We’re begging you!”

With that, the three men bowed their heads so deeply, they were almost grinding their foreheads in the dirt.

“I don’t intend to punish anyone. I’m aware that it’s hard to believe.”

I went on to explain that I would make arrangements for all of them to be accepted at the farming village and gave them rucksacks full of preserved food and other tools for the journey to the royal capital. Just to keep my identity secret, I made sure to give them a different lineup of food from what I gave the other people as Satou.

I also gave them a few wagons for transporting the children and elderly, as well as some ox golems made with Create Stone Object and Create Earth Servant. I threw in a stone wolf to protect them, too.

“P-please take me with you!”

The boy we saw get arrested that afternoon ran up to me with a cry. I guess

that guard really did throw him out of the town.

“Very well. As long as you’re willing to work hard, I’ll take you on.”

Farming is hard work; I hoped he’d be up for it.

“Bring this letter to the Echigoya Company in the royal capital. If anyone stops you at the city gates or checkpoints, just show them these documents.”

I gave them a letter to the manager and a written guarantee that the Echigoya Company would take responsibility for them.

While I was at it, I told them they could invite any refugees they met on the road to the royal capital to join their number as they saw fit.

“It’ll be a difficult journey, but don’t leave the weak or injured behind. Make sure everyone gets to the royal capital.”

There’s a reason I couldn’t just teleport them to the royal capital.

Namely, I think people are more inclined to value something they earned for themselves than something that was simply given to them.

“Got it... I mean, yes, sir. I swear on my life that I, Motes, will lead everyone to the royal capital. And we will work our hardest in the farming village, that we might repay our debt to you, Lord Kuro.”

This was the first time I’d caught his name; he sounded like he might part the ocean for his people or something.

“Perfect. I’m looking forward to it.”

I left the group still bowing and used Return to teleport back to my friends.

> Title Acquired: Bringer of Hope

> Title Acquired: Fortune-Teller

> Title Acquired: Prophet

I don’t remember telling any fortunes, but this is far from the first time the title system has given me something weird. I’ll just ignore it.

The next day, I checked in on the refugee camp before we left town and saw that they had already packed up and left.

I'm sure they were already on the road to the royal capital, full of hope for the future.



"So this is the capital at last."

The capital of Zetts County was also overflowing with refugees outside the city walls.

Most of the towns and cities we'd passed through since Fau were in a similar state, and we'd done the same kind of charity work for all of them. Since most of the refugees had similar problems, I improved on my methods and had the rest of the group help me.

"Generic."

"Yes, Mia. This area does not have the same kind of local color as other towns and cities."

"Looks like the restaurants serve royal capital-style cuisine."

"The architecture is impressive, even if there aren't many different varieties. I've hardly seen any single-story buildings."

While the construction techniques were the best in the county, I had to agree that there wasn't much else to write home about.

"Do you think they've got any specialties besides mandarin oranges?"

"Zetts County is also famous for its smooth wine, so I'm sure they grow grapes, too."

Although the wine wasn't especially delicious, it was very drinkable and ideal for beginners. I visited some liquor stores and bought my favorite kinds by the barrel.

This somewhat unusual behavior seemed to draw attention; when we finished shopping and went back to the inn, I had an invitation to dinner with Count Zetts himself.

"There's not much time..."

Since it was short notice, I didn't have enough time to prepare a proper gift.

I picked out a few pieces of jewelry and artwork that an upper noble might like. Then, to keep things interesting, I also chose a handful of the mandarin orange sweets Lulu and I had been developing on our journey. I planned to give the rest to the Echigoya Company, along with the recipes.

“Welcome, Viscount Pendragon.”

The lord of Zetts County was a rather short man.

“Why, he’s only a child. When I heard our visitor was a mithril explorer who’d defeated a dragon, I was expecting a big, burly man.”

This lukewarm appraisal of me came from Count Zetts’s third daughter.

She looked very adult for her seventeen years of age, with the impressive build of a pro wrestler.

“Don’t be rude, Hohruna! He is an honorable swordsman who challenged an enormous wyvern without even wearing armor. Sir Pendragon, I do apologize for my daughter’s rudeness.”

The similar-looking countess pushed her daughter’s head down with one muscular arm, bowing her own head to me as well.

It turned out that the count and countess had attended the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony at the end of the year and saw me defeat a chaos wyvern with Ryouna of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.

In spite of the initial rockiness, the orange sweets I brought were very well received, and I wound up giving in to the countess’s pleas for a few of the recipes.

The count was so smitten with his wife that, with her help, I was able to persuade him to promise to aid the refugees traveling through Zetts County in exchange for the recipes. This way, there should be less suffering on the road even after we left.



“The state of this place kind of reminds me of the old Muno.”

“It’s understandable, with so many citizens leaving.”

When we moved on from Zetts County to Lessau County, it did indeed remind

me of the way Muno had once been, just as Arisa said. It was just as desolate, and just as bone-chillingly cold. The latter was probably because there wasn't enough power in the City Core to fully adjust the weather.

We saw plenty of villages that were either deserted or only had a handful of elderly inhabitants who'd been left behind, and it seemed like many people had become bandits out of desperation, too.

Up until now, we'd only heard rumors and never actually seen any of these bandits, since we were traveling in a royal carriage. This time, though...

"Leave all yer valuables with us!"

"And yer food, too!"

"A-and yer women!"

Just as I noticed the arrows blocking our way, a group of men stepped into our path, wearing tattered leather armor and armed with swords and spears. There were six men in front of us and five behind us.

"Talk about cliché," Arisa commented in Tactical Talk, connecting our group.

"There are three archers each at ten and two o'clock, and two more hiding at eight o'clock. Plus five men on either side hiding in the bushes for an ambush. Be careful."

"Master, the ambushers have casting nets, I report."

As I relayed the information from my map to the group, Nana added an observation, thanks to her Foundation ability to see through the bushes.

"Left."

Mia covered her mouth with her sleeve and started the Balloon chant in a whisper.

She was probably saying she'd take the left ambushers.

"I will defend against the net on the right, I declare."

"Then I'll fend off the arrows."

"Let me handle the archers up ahead, then."

“Tama will take the baaack?”

“Pochi will stompy-stomp the enemies in front, sir!”

“And I’ll take the enemies to the rear.”

The girls quickly divided up the work to take out the bandits.

“Don’t forget to hold back, everyone—these bandits aren’t very strong.”

I gave a warning, just to be safe.

Pochi and Tama turned up their strength limiter bracelets and switched their weapons to wooden Magic Swords imbued with Soft Stun.

“Uh-oh, are you ladies scared?”

“Gya-ha-ha! Don’t worry, we’ll be real nice.”

I saw one of the bandits signal the ambushers.

“Here they come.”

Just as I relayed this information, Mia activated Balloon and sent the ambush on the left flying.

“Dammit! They’re onto us!”

The ambushers on the right threw their nets. Nana blocked them all with her Flexible Shields and kept pressing forward to take them all out with a “Shield Bash.”

“Archers! Kill the mage!”

“As if I’d let that happen.”

Arisa’s Deracinator spell blocked the arrows.

And the archers were next...

“Take this!”

“Shooooom!”

Lulu used the shotgun-size Magic Guns in each of her hands to take out the archers hiding in the trees up ahead, while Tama took out pebbles from her Fairy Pack to pelt at the ones hiding in the bushes behind us.

“Got you.”

“Sir!”

Liza and Pochi took down the attackers to the front and rear.

“Oof...!”

While Pochi’s bracelets and wooden sword kept damage to a minimum, Liza didn’t hold back as much as she probably should have, resulting in some of the bandits taking more serious wounds than she intended.

Normally I wouldn’t be too worried about thieves, but considering the state of their county, I was willing to take extenuating circumstances into account. I decided to use potions to make sure they wouldn’t have any lasting effects, at least.

“Master, I apologize for the trouble.”

“Don’t worry, it was no big deal. Let’s take care of the aftermath for now.”

We took the bandits’ weapons, tied them to a nearby tree, and sent a message to a nearby fort to come collect the criminals. The Summon Pigeon spell was proving handier than I expected.

That should just about do it.

We got back on our horses and carriage and returned to the road.

“Oh, right. Liza, Nana, next time you need to hold back in a battle, try using these.”

I gave Liza and Nana the old style of power-limiting bracelets that Tama and Pochi used to wear.

“Matchyyyyy?”

“Matching pair, sir!”

I decided not to point out that it technically wasn’t a pair, since there were four of them.

“I would love a PVP crowd-control spell like Mia’s.”

“With Space Magic? Maybe you could compress the air and send them

flying?”

“Good idea. I can probably figure out something like that with one of my current spells.”

Arisa started experimenting with Space Magic, producing popping sound effects.

That was fine, since we were already far away from where we left the robbers, and there was no one else on the road.

“...Got it!”

Arisa stuck out her hand and created a ball of compressed air with Space Magic, striking it into a nearby tree.

Creaking and cracking, the roughly torso-width tree collapsed.

“That is too strong, I appraise.”

“I just messed up a little, that’s all. I’ll have to practice a bit before I use it on any real targets.”

Arisa set about practicing on nearby trees.

The beastfolk girls and Nana started practicing holding back the strength of their attacks, too.

“Master, do we have any Wind Rods that aren’t too strong?”

Lulu timidly made a rare request as she watched the practice. She probably wanted a nonlethal weapon, too.

While Wind Rods weren’t as deadly as Fire Rods, a direct blow would still cause serious injury to the average person and could even be fatal if it struck a bad spot.

I took out a short staff from my Storage, used “Spellblade” the size of a needle to create a thin hole in the middle, and stuck a wind stone inside.

Even without magic circuits, it should still produce wind if you put magic power into the staff.

“How’s this?”

Lulu tested it out. While it produced wind, the effect scattered too quickly to incapacitate anyone.

I was able to produce better effects when I refined it in a few ways, like making the hole spiral-shaped and carving a rune into the wind stone.

“Uh-oh, sir.”

Pochi, who’d been poking at the dust created when I carved the wind stone, accidentally let some magic loose into it and produced a gust of wind that sent her tumbling away.

“Meeew...?”

Tama put the powder on the palm of her hand and looked at it thoughtfully.

“Meeew...!”

Once she tested out the ability to produce wind by putting magic into the powder, she gleefully used it to flap her and Pochi’s clothes around.

“Wind-return jutsuuu?”

Tama proceeded to use the wind stone powder to flip Nana’s and Lulu’s skirts.

“Eek! Stop that, Tama! No snacks for naughty children.”

“Sorryyy.”

Lulu held down her skirt and scolded Tama.

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s called ‘divine wind,’ not ‘wind return.’”

Arisa made a reference to a famous old manga with a pudgy ninja protagonist.

“I bet you could do ‘fire return’ with fire stones, too.”

“I wanna tryyy?”

“Pochi wants to try, too, sir!”

Rather than let a bunch of children play with fire unsupervised, I joined Tama and Pochi to help with their endeavors.

“Firebally jutsuuu?”

Tama used fire stone powder to blow flames at a target golem.

“Pochi uses firebally jutsu, too, si—Waaaaah!”

Sure enough, Pochi nearly set herself on fire with the powder. I used Unit Deployment to pull her away just in time.

“...Silly me, sir. Pochi’s a samurai, not a ninja, sir.”

The incident spooked her so much that she started practicing quick draws with her sword instead.

Maybe I should come up with some more nonlethal ways to knock people out, too?

Smell Field wasn’t very good for the task: It could easily kill people if I wasn’t careful, and it would affect my allies, too, unless they put on masks in advance. It could definitely be useful for getting a mob under control, just not for on-the-spot countermeasures.

Oh, I know.

I knew my new Fallen Hammer spell was strong enough to knock a flying wyvern out of the sky, so it would probably be way too much to use on humans. The Turbulence spell only churned up the air, though; maybe that would work for knocking people out without having to lock on first.

“Might as well give it a try...”

Aiming in the opposite direction from the forest, where everyone else was experimenting, I selected Turbulence from the magic menu.

I turned its power down to the minimum to keep it as weak as possible, and...

Suddenly the trees started creaking and shaking, then snapping ever more loudly, until a storm kicked up that pulled out a whole bundle of trees by the roots.

I quickly stopped the spell, and used other Wind Magic like Secret Field and Air Cushion to cancel out its effects.

“Whoa! What was that all about, Master?!”



“I just thought I might be able to use it to knock people out...”

Cold sweat tricked down my forehead as I looked at the scene in front of my eyes, which looked like the aftermath of a huge typhoon passing through.

“If you’d tried that on those bandits, we’d still be burying the bodies.”

“No kidding...”

So much for just disturbing the air a little bit. That was as powerful as any Wind Attack spell.

I should probably just stick to getting a scroll made for an original spell with a fixed-attack maximum for incapacitating people. In the meantime, I’d just keep using Remote Stun. As annoying as it was to have to lock onto the targets every time, at least it wouldn’t hurt anyone indiscriminately.

Feeling a bit guilty, I did my best to restore the forest to its original state with Magic Hand. Thanks to the help of my “Disguise” skill, it shouldn’t be too noticeable from the road.

Around then, we started seeing other travelers on the road again. I had the group stop their practice, which had strayed from the original intention of control and incapacitation anyway, and we resumed our journey.

“There aren’t as many monsters about as we heard on the road.”

Liza looked around from atop her horse.

“That’s the work of the expedition force headed to Vistall Duchy.”

The royal army must have successfully eliminated most of the monsters on the road, just as they promised in the kingdom meeting.

They had neglected the monsters that were far from the main road, though. Each night when we set up camp, I went around to the nearby villages with “Flashrunning” and used a Remote Arrow barrage to wipe out most of the monsters in the area.

For some reason, they hadn’t yet reclaimed the capital city we passed on the way. Since the Lessau County army was still doing its best to deal with all the monsters there, I decided not to interfere out of respect for their honor.

From what I heard in a nearby village, the royal army had offered to get rid of the monsters in the capital city, yet for some reason the lord of the county stubbornly insisted that his men would handle it alone.

As I thought back on all this while riding my horse, Tama and Pochi, who were riding alongside me, pointed up ahead.

“Sparklyyy?”

“Master, there’s something shiny in the mountains, sir!”

“Looks like we’ve caught up to them already. Not to worry. That’s just the royal army, on their way to Vistall Duchy.”

The army’s weapons and armor were probably catching the light as they crossed the mountains.

Once we warmed ourselves up with a nice hot pot lunch, we put our carriage away and divided onto five golem horses to catch up with the royal army troops.

“Satou.”

“Master, a messenger is coming, I declare.”

Mia and Nana, who’d gone up ahead to scout, returned with a report.

I couldn’t blame them for being on their guard about a group of riders on horseback approaching their army at high speeds.

“My name is Bauen, of the Holy Knights’ eighth battalion, from—Lady Liza!”

The messenger interrupted his introduction to exclaim when he saw Liza.

He must have met her when she was visiting the Holy Knights’ barracks.

“An acquaintance of yours, Liza?”

“Yes, we sparred many times in the royal capital...”

“Then this young man must be Sir Untouchable! My name is Bauen Ganriu. I was born in a remote region of the Saga Empire, but I am a Shiga Eight candidate like yourself, that I am.”

Arisa twitched in reaction to “that I am,” which I completely ignored rather

than let her make a scene.

His name was confusingly similar to Gouen Roitall, the former Shiga Eight Swordsman; however, unlike the brawny Gouen, Bauen was a slender swordsman. He also carried a curved longsword instead of a broadsword.

He must be a Saga Empire samurai like Mr. Kajiro, the Zi-Gain-style swordsman who taught at our explorers' school in Labyrinth City.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Bauen. Are you on your way to Vistall Duchy?"

"Indeed, that I am. Though we Holy Knights are mainly tasked with hunting the monsters along the highway, that we are. I hear tell that the rebel army boasts some skilled knights and mages who we may do battle with as well, that we may."

The eighth battalion of the Holy Knights was apparently captained by Ms. Ryuona, the Grass Cutter of the Shiga Eight.

"It seems this expedition is also a final test for we Shiga Eight Swordsmen candidates, so I only hope we will encounter worthy opponents, that I do. Have you also come to participate for that purpose?"

As he asked this question, his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He appeared to be quite serious about this.

"No, Liza and I have withdrawn our candidacy for the Shiga Eight Swordsmen. And we are heading to the small nations past Kageus County, not to Vistall Duchy."

"I see...what a shame, that it is. My rematch with Lady Liza, who saw through my 'Windblade,' even in our very first match, shall have to wait until another time, that it shall."

Once I clarified, Mr. Bauen's smile finally turned genuine.

It also seemed to help when I showed him my Vice-Minister of Tourism medallion. He must have concluded that I was seeking success as a civil official, not as a military officer.

We chatted as we rode along until we eventually caught up to the royal army

near the summit.

“Master, some of the carriages amid the ranks appear to be civilian, I observe.”

“Yes, those are merchants traveling along with the army, that they are.”

This way, they didn’t have to worry about monster or bandit attacks.

According to Bauen, they were allowed to join the march as long as they didn’t hinder the army in any way.

Since the army took up the entire width of the road, we rode our horses in the grass on the shoulder instead.

For some reason, Mr. Bauen went back to his home unit only to get his vice-captain’s permission to join us.

“Since you are here, I can introduce you to His Excellency Duke Vistall and the generals, that I can.”

No, thank you.

As much as I wanted to decline, it would be considered rude for me to pass by without greeting the duke and generals, now that I was an upper noble myself.

Left with no other choice, we followed Mr. Bauen to the troop headquarters.

Luckily, since they were traveling, too, it would probably only be a short visit.

“Good to see you, Viscount Pendragon. So you’ve decided to join us and make a name for yourself after all, eh?”

“I wish you the greatest of success on the battlefield, Your Excellency; however, I am afraid I must still refrain from participating myself. My most urgent duty at present is to the work His Majesty assigned me as Vice-Minister of Tourism. Please forgive me for being unable to join your noble cause at this time.”

Remembering my lessons in noble speech, I told Duke Vistall as politely as possible that I had other matters to attend to.

“Hmph. So you’ve chosen to wag your tail for the prime minister instead of the noble path of a Shiga Eight Swordsman... It seems your judgment failed you,

Baron Mosaddo.”

Standing near Duke Vistall was Baron Jelil Mosaddo, the Scarlet Nobleman, who lowered his head politely.

When I first arrived, he and the other Shiga Eight candidates viewed me as a rival. Luckily, like Mr. Bauen, he seemed to ease up once he heard my explanation.

“Thanks for the greeting. You may leave now,” Duke Vistall declared, clearly sensing that I wouldn’t be of any benefit to him. Unpleasant as he was personally, I didn’t mind that he made quick judgments, especially since it meant I didn’t have to stick around.

“Satou! You weren’t even going to say hi to your old war buddy?”

Ms. Ryuona, the Grass Cutter, appeared, her six-pack on full display and her trademark battle scythe over her shoulders.

The “war buddy” comment must be referring to when we defeated a chaos wyvern together during the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony.

“Is what the duke said true? You’re really not gonna fight with us?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

Ryuona slung an arm over my shoulders. “You sure you don’t wanna come? We’re fighting a really crazy beast this time, you know?”

“A crazy beast?”

“Yeah, this thing wiped out the two knight squadrons who’d taken down the fortress city, all by itself.”

I’d heard in the royal capital that the first anti-rebellion force was quashed, but not that it was by a single opponent.

As much as I appreciated the free information, she probably shouldn’t go around sharing military secrets so easily.

“Is it a greater demon?”

If so, I’d better go in there as Nanashi to take it out.

“That’s still under investigation. According to the military priests and

priestesses, it's most likely not a demon at all."

"But what else could defeat two knight squadrons, except...?"

"...a dragon? That's my best guess, anyway."

"A fully grown one?"

"Yeah, right. If it was that bad, they'd send old Mr. Juleburg or Reilus in for sure. A young, lesser dragon is more likely to go wild on a human army. Either way, it's gonna be a hell of a fight for sure."

Ryuona licked her lips, wearing a rare and wolfish grin. That was the face of a serious battle junky. It was a good thing Liza didn't come here with me—I'm sure hearing this would make her want to join the fight, too.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll be wishing you good fortune on the battlefield from afar."

"Oh, c'monnn! You're seriously not gonna come? We'd be able to have another fun fight like against that huge wyvern if you came along..."

For personal reasons, I *really* don't want to fight a dragon to the death, thanks.

That being said, I was willing to bet it'd be a demi-dragon like a hydra, since it didn't sound anything like the lesser dragon that attacked Seiryuu City.

"You don't need my help when you have the Shiga Eight candidates, right?"

"Oh, those guys? Aside from Jelil and Bauen, they're all full of hot air, I tell ya." Still, she sighed and reluctantly acquiesced. "Fiiine, your loss."

Based on the numbers and injuries of the defeated knight squadrons, she told me their foe was estimated around level 45 or 50. If it was any stronger, there would probably have been more past sightings in surrounding areas.

Since Ms. Ryuona was level 48 herself, and most of the Shiga Eight candidates were at least in the mid-to high 40s, they should be able to handle a level 50-ish dragon without too much trouble.

We parted ways with the royal army and continued through the lengthy Lessau County, eventually reaching the temporary capital of Seus.



“Whoa, this place looks like a defeated country in a war movie.”

While Arisa’s remark was rude, it was admittedly an accurate description of Seus City.

The market was sparse, with few products or people. Pickpockets and robbers were rampant on the streets. The few passersby we saw looked listless, their heads hanging low. Street urchins slumped in the alleyways, and according to the rumors, kidnapping and slave trafficking were widespread, too.

There was an Echigoya Company branch that had recently opened here, but it had very little business thus far.

“Maybe we can help out a little?”

Since we’d come all this way, we decided to visit Count Lessau in Seus Castle.

I was strong-armed into giving a considerable bribe to the receptionist. At least the results were speedy enough that I was able to secure an invitation to the evening’s ball.

“This is a little...hmm.”

In stark contrast with the suffering citizens, the nobles were living in the lap of luxury. Even if it was partly just because of the ball being held there, the castle was like a completely different world from the rest of the city.

“Why, isn’t that gem a Heaven’s Teardrop?”

“But of course. As the first wife of Viscount Doseu, I simply must have nothing but the best.”

“So Sir Jissu’s son has been sent to help liberate the capital?”

“We can hardly let the royal army do as it pleases with our ancestral Lessau City.”

“Well said, indeed. Meanwhile, our lord was utterly hoodwinked by those sly old foxes and wolves in the royal capital into giving up our share of cores.”

“Truly, such a pity. Goodness knows when we’ll be able to reopen our mines and factories.”

“Indeed, such is the struggle when there is no supply of cores.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. It’s just as I thought—the experienced Lord Jilgos would have been far better suited to the role of lord than the young Lord Coulmas.”

“You mustn’t speak such blasphemy aloud.”

“Ah, of course. I shall be more careful.”

From the snippets I heard of the nobles’ conversations, they were primarily shallow boasting, complaining about a loss in profits, or smugly disparaging of their young lord.

As if the threat of monsters wasn’t bad enough, it seemed like young Count Lessau had plenty of internal affairs to worry about, too.

I had my own feelings about the former Count Lessau, considering what he’d done to Tifaleeza and Neru, but maybe I could still offer a helping hand to his son.

“Sir Pendragon, thank you for coming all this way from far-off Muno County!”

Evidently, Count Lessau thought I really did travel here straight from Muno County.

I couldn’t blame him, since we didn’t have a chance to talk at any of the royal capital social events.

“Sir, the reception room.”

“I know.”

After a whispered prompting from an elderly consul, Count Lessau led me to the reception room. Evidently, he had some kind of business with me.

I barely even had time to sit before the young lord cut to the chase.

“You want me to...invest?”

“That’s right. Our county is soliciting investments from interested parties.”

It sounded like he was asking for a loan, under the guise of investment, to me.

“Of course, you would be duly compensated.”

The young count seemed to mistake my stunned silence for demanding a reward.

“My cousin has just lost her fiancé in the recent demon attack and is lost in the depths of heartbreak. If you wish, I would be glad to arrange for you to meet her at our next tea party.”

Really? Because it looked to me like she was lost in the depths of the breakfast buffet.

“I’m afraid I am far too young and inexperienced to soothe the sadness in such a noble lady’s heart.”

“Then what would you want?”

Wow, he just came out and asked directly.

Apparently, negotiating isn’t this kid’s strong point.

“That depends on the size of the investment you seek.”

“Wha...?”

Caught off guard by my counter-question, the boy count looked to his elderly consul for help.

“Five thousand gold coins...would be ideal. But of course, we cannot expect a foreign noble to take on such a heavy burden. Would one thousand gold coins be acceptable?”

Ah, yes. The typical “open with a ridiculous amount, then name the amount you actually want” strategy.

That wasn’t much money to me personally, but it was probably a lot to most people. It was the same as the budget I’d been given for the year as Vice-Minister of Tourism, and around what Marchioness Ashinen paid for the elixir in the auction, too.

“So something that would befit a thousand gold coin investment...?”

Was there anything I could possibly want from this impoverished Lessau County? Actually, yes, there was.

“Well, a friend’s company asked me to mediate on their behalf...”

I requested the establishment of an orphanage in the city, as well as a building and bankrupt factory the Echigoya Company had been hoping to acquire.

“An orphanage? A bankrupt factory?”

The young lord looked at his consul, confused by my response.

The old consul nodded, and the young count readily agreed to the former; however, the latter apparently belonged to one of his nobles, so he seemed hesitant.

“Just accept his conditions, young master. Leave the persuasion to me.”

“All right, if you say so. I’m counting on you.”

Thanks to the elderly consul’s intervention, my conditions were accepted.

I planned to entrust running the orphanage to the Echigoya Company and offer them the money from selling the building and factory to the company as funds for the first ten years of establishing the orphanage.

I also considered requesting purchasing priority rights to the Lessau’s Lifeblood, made at a nearby winery, but decided against it.

The last thing I needed was to become a greedy noble who kept the wine from being widely circulated. This particular wine was a beloved brand of the vampire progenitor and reincarnation Van, who lived in the Lower Stratum of the Celivera Labyrinth.

“Incidentally, Viscount Pendragon, I have heard tell that you are a renowned explorer yourself.”

Once we made the arrangements and signed the paperwork, the elderly consul brought up a different subject.

“Is it true that you defeated a floormaster in the Celivera Labyrinth?”

“Yes, we received a medal from His Majesty for that feat.”

“Very impressive.”

The young lord was quick to praise my accomplishment.

It was so abrupt that it almost seemed like the whole conversation had been

planned in advance.

“It’s all thanks to the hard work of my companions.”

“Splendid. It seems you have truly magnificent companions, then.”

This praise definitely seemed artificial now.

They were probably about to bring up some new proposal.

“Are you aware that the ruins of the former Flue Empire lie just outside Lessau County?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

Searching the map, I discovered that aside from abandoned villages and mines, there were ancient ruins in an otherwise empty mountain range about half a mile in radius.

Based on the distribution of treasure and guardians in the ruins, most of the rooms seemed to have been explored already, save for the very deepest floor.

The road from the nearest village also stopped in places, indicating that no one had ventured into the ruins for some time.

“We would like to offer you ten years’ exploration rights of those ruins for five hundred gold coins.”

“Five hundred? That seems fairly low. Have the ruins already been explored?”

“No one has entered in these past hundred years.”

“Does that mean they were already explored over a hundred years ago?”

Based on the map information about the abandoned village nearby, it wouldn’t be surprising if that much time had passed already.

“...Hidden doors are an indispensable part of ancient ruins. Surely an explorer as skilled as yourself would be able to find them when others have failed, no?”

“But surely they have been so long abandoned because investigators concluded that there were no more unexplored areas? I cannot imagine that we have any more luck or skill than the explorers of years past.”

“Truly? I should think someone as fortunate as yourself might be able to find

something new.”

Well, that was kind of rude.

He seemed to realize that as well, and quickly added, “Though of course that good fortune comes of true skill.”

“Five hundred gold coins is a bit high for a roll of the dice. Besides, if we find anything in the ruins, wouldn’t Lessau County retain rights to first priority?”

I pressed the elderly consul, pointing out that exploring gear isn’t cheap.

“Of course...”

The consul squinted at me, trying to read my intentions. I used my “Poker Face” skill to keep a blank expression.

“...it would be tax-free. We would not enforce first priority, though we do have appearances to uphold. If you find something truly rare, we hope that you would inform us first.”

That was fair. It wouldn’t look good if Count Lessau didn’t even know about a rare item found in Lessau County.

“I admire your fortitude. Still, it goes against a mithril explorer’s pride to pay a great deal of money to go on an archeological dig.”

“Then let us also declare any materials you gain from monsters along the way to be tax-free. Of course, you must still sell us any cores at the market rate.”

Almost there.

“There is an abandoned mine nearby. It was very prosperous until some fifty years ago. We will throw in mining rights for twenty years.”

The elderly consul made a proposal that would put any swindler to shame.

“And your findings will be tax-free for five years, no matter what precious metals or gems you might find. How about that?”

It normally took years to bring an abandoned mine back into mineable shape. And according to Miss Manager at the Echigoya Company, five tax-free years wasn’t much, even if it started from when the mining began.

On top of that, if the mining rights lasted twenty years, that meant they

would return to Count Lessau just when the mine was getting back on the right track.

As a bonus, when I searched the map, I discovered that the long-abandoned mine was infested with several hundred demi-goblins.

“As long as the mining is an option and not an obligation.”

“Of course.”

We settled on a single mountain for the area of development, and I agreed to purchase rights to the ruins and mines for five hundred gold coins.

Incidentally, while they seemed to think that the mines were completely dried up, there was actually a gold vein about three times deeper than where they had dug. There were untouched treasures in the ruins, too, and more than a thousand gold coins, albeit of the Flue Empire variety. I would definitely be able to make my money back.

The very next day, my companions and I explored the untouched area of the ruins. Over the next few days, I also collected a huge amount of gold ingots from the mines, and ultimately multiplied my investment by a dozen at least.

The combination of my menu and “Search Entire Map” skill really is ridiculously overpowered.

In exchange for the enormous profit I’d made off his land, I gave the hundreds of cores I got from the demi-goblins in the abandoned mines to Count Lessau. Even low-quality cores still work as fuel for Magic Furnaces and so on.

Hopefully, that would help with the core shortage a little.



“Master, someone’s fighting over there!”

“Battle?”

As we approached the northernmost point of the lengthy Lessau County, Pochi and Tama spotted a far-off battle.

It was in the direction of Vistall Duchy.

Nana peered through a longscope. “It appears to be a fort battle, I report.”

The royal army and rebellion army were clashing. I assumed these weren't the forces that got wiped out after taking back the capital city.

The attackers were using golems and catapults as well as all kinds of siege engines, while the fort fought back with Magic Cannons.

Neither side had many magic users, though there was evidence that the attackers had used Earth Magic to make trenches and walled encampments. The royal army was the one defending the fort.

"What a remote place to have a battle."

"Looks like that fort is an important strategic point for the north road of Vistall Duchy."

I told Arisa what I'd figured out from my map.

Whoever lost control of this fort would have to watch their backs as they fought farther north.

"No wonder it's such an intense fight."

Arisa used a longscope to observe the battlefield. She probably chose that instead of her Space Magic spell so she wouldn't have to see the gory details up close.

The commanding officer of the attacking side didn't seem very skilled: The soldiers on the front lines were getting mowed down mercilessly by the Magic Cannons.

...Battles between humans are way too gruesome.

Losing all desire to observe, I turned my horse back to the road.

"Wait...that's the Kuvork crest."

At Arisa's words, I swiveled back automatically.

Checking the map information, I saw that one of the attacking squadrons was made up of slaves from the Yowork Kingdom.

I used a longscope to get a closer look, too.

The crest on their shields must be that of Arisa's destroyed homeland, Kuvork Kingdom. It had been deliberately crossed out in black ink, probably by

someone from the Yowork Kingdom.

“Let’s go.”

“You don’t want to save them?”

“It’s not just Kuvork soldiers who are dying.”

Arisa shook her head without looking up.

Before long, the rebel side began retreating, as well as the Yowork army and their slaves.

I made sure of that before I turned my horse and followed Arisa and the others.



“Master, there’s a commotion at the border checkpoint, I report.”

There was a Kageus County fort overlooking the valley path that separated Lessau County and Kageus County.

A large group of soldiers was gathered at the fort, strictly checking all the baggage of the merchants passing through. They seemed to be turning back all refugees, to the point where none were coming this way any longer.

I braced myself as we approached, but once I showed my viscount’s identification and Vice-Minister’s medallion, they let us through quite easily.

Once we crossed the border, I got to use my “Search Entire Map” skill for the first time in a while. Luckily, I didn’t find any dangerous-looking people or demons. Hopefully, we’d be able to spend our visit in peace.

“Meeeat?”

“It’s Mr. Sheep, sir! It makes yummy jingisukan, sir!”

When we passed over the mountain, we emerged onto a plateau where sheep were peacefully grazing.

“Let’s have jingisukan for lunch today, then, shall we?”

“Yaaay!” “Sir!”

We bought mutton at the nearby village and enjoyed jingisukan, a Japanese

grilled mutton dish, with a scenic view.

Arisa, who'd been a little quiet since the battle, finally started smiling again. Hopefully, the delicious food and calming view comforted her aching heart.

We continued through the fields and forests and reached the capital, Kageus City, by the time the sun set.

"This place feels familiar, sir."

"Oui, oooui?"

"Yes, it reminds me of Seiryuu City."

The beastfolk girls looked nostalgic for their hometown.

Once I took care of things with Arisa and Lulu, maybe we should stop back in Seiryuu City next.

"Satou."

Mia tugged on my sleeve.

Looking where she was pointing, I saw a bearded man staring at us.

"What's up?"

Just as Arisa turned to look at him...

"Wh-why, if it ain't Lady Arisa!"

The man exclaimed her name in a thick accent.

An Unexpected Reunion

Satou here. Even in the modern world, where cell phones and e-mail are commonplace, you sometimes lose touch with people. It's not a big deal if it's someone you didn't know well, but it can be worrying if a close friend drops out of contact.

"...Ben! It's you!"

A man had called out to Arisa in the capital of Kageus County.

It seemed they knew each other. According to the AR, the bearded man's name was Ben Farmar, though he didn't have a title to go with his family name.

"Lady Arisaaa! Thank the stars, yer alive after all."

"You too, Ben! I'm so glad you managed to survive."

Arisa and Ben both burst into tears as they hugged each other.

Judging by the fact that they were both using the language of the lost Kuvork Kingdom, they must be friends from back when Arisa was a princess.

I turned to Lulu, who looked surprised.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, he was a hereditary knight and one of Arisa's vassals."

She explained that this Ben person helped Arisa run experiments for her internal reformation plan, to the point where he could even be called her right-hand man.

His support of Arisa's reforms started with tilling the fields with leaf mold, and continued into making compost, beekeeping, and creating farming vehicles. He even got his relatives involved in making new tools and farming appliances.

"Is the rest of your family with you?"

"Uh-huh. Thanks to the letter you done sent us through Miss Lulu, we all got

out safe and sound.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

Arisa wiped away her tears and smiled.

“I know! Lady Arisa! I got someone you just gotta meet!”

“Someone I should meet?”

“Uh-huh!”

Ben picked up Arisa and started running so quickly that her wig tumbled off.

I didn’t think he was trying to kidnap her or anything. Still, he should probably slow down a little.

The rest of us hurried after Arisa and Ben.

“Your Highness! You in here?!”

“What is it, Sir Farmar?! How many times have I told you to knock before you —?”

A cold-looking young man started to tell Ben off, then stopped midsentence when he saw Arisa.

“Th-the witch!”

“Lord Pid! T’ain’t right to call Lady Arisa that name!”

Ben reacted wrathfully to the boy’s rude words.

The other people who were gathered in the entrance hall all stared at us, too. Most of their expressions went dark when they spotted Arisa.

I’d almost forgotten that she had titles like “Witch of the Lost Kingdom” and “The Mad Princess.”

“Silence! Ben, how could you bring the witch who destroyed our land to the headquarters of the kingdom’s revival, of all places?! You fool!”

“Lady Arisa didn’t destroy nothin’! It was the second prince and the minister who butted in, I tell ya.”

They should’ve asked Arisa to come back once they resolved that conflict, then.

I gently retrieved the increasingly distressed-looking Arisa from Ben's arms.

"What is this insolence?! You are in the presence of His Highness!"

A door on the second floor visible from the atrium flew open, and a cranky-looking old gentleman emerged.

Behind him was a chubby young boy around middle school age. He must be the "highness" in question—making him Arisa's older brother.

From what she'd told me in the past, the rest of her family aside from Lulu had all been either executed or sacrificed to bring back a withered labyrinth. It looked like there might have been other survivors after all, though.

"Brother Eruus!"

"...Huh? Arisa? It's really you!"

Eruus pushed past the older gentleman, ran down the stairs, and threw his arms around Arisa exultantly.

"Brother, did any of the others make it, too...?"

Eruus's face clouded. *"I'm the only one who survived. Elder Brother Sitam saved me."*

"I see... Brother Sitam..."

Checking in the AR, I saw that Eruus was technically a slave.

He must have been put under a Geist like Arisa and Lulu.

"Arisa! Let's rebuild Kuvork Kingdom together in their memory!"

Eruus grasped Arisa's hands.

"Your Highness, no!"

The onlookers all exclaimed in alarm at Eruus's sudden declaration.

I guess the rude young man who called her a "witch" wasn't the only one who blamed her for what happened to their kingdom. Only Eruus, Ben, and a few of their friends and family seemed to know otherwise.

"Arisa, let's find an inn and turn in for today."

"Yeah, good idea. I'm sure they need time to cool off, too."

Even someone as stouthearted as Arisa was probably hurt to see so many people from her homeland rejecting her.

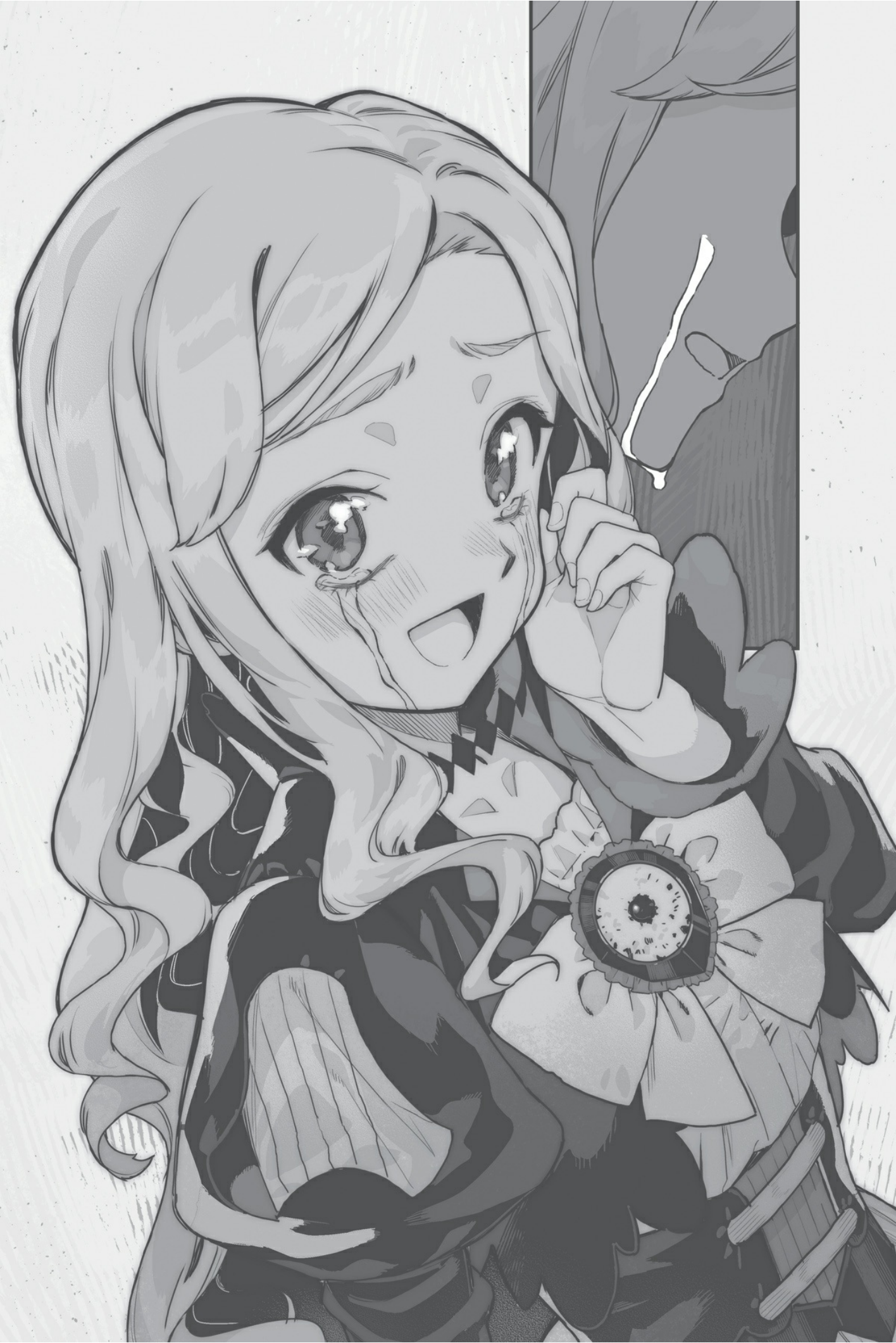
I spoke to the elderly gentleman, who seemed relatively reasonable, and told him that we'd go to an inn and send a messenger once we were settled in. Then we left their base behind.

A few people blocked our way, claiming that we might reveal their location, but there wasn't much they could do to stop mithril explorers like us. Pochi and Tama lightly knocked a few aside, and the rest were quick to clear our path.

"Arisa, I'll make whatever you want for dinner tonight. You should eat your fill and go straight to bed."

As tears streamed down Arisa's cheeks, I pulled her close to me, comforting her ineptly.

"...No, it's okay. I'm not crying because I'm sad, Master. My big brother Eruus... I'm happy that someone else survived besides Lulu and me, even if it was only one person."



Arisa looked up at me, smiling through her tears.

“Well, in that case...we should celebrate Eruus’s survival.”

“Thank you.”

Arisa rested her head on my arm.

I pretended not to notice that she was just putting on a brave front, even though it was obvious.

Hopefully, that would soothe her sorrow at least a little.



“Who’s there?”

The elderly consul, who was heading to his desk to do some work, turned around when he heard me knock on the door.

After putting Arisa to bed, I came to speak with the former marquis of Kuvork Kingdom, who was now the guardian to the former fifth prince, Eruus.

“Good evening.”

Since he’d questioned me in Shigan language, I responded in the same.

“You were with Lady Arisa.”

“Yes. I am Viscount Satou Pendragon of the Shiga Kingdom, Arisa’s guardian.”

I left out the fact that I was a vassal of Count Muno out of concern that there might still be rumors about it being “cursed territory” in this far-off land.

“An upper noble of Shiga Kingdom, eh...?”

The man must have misheard me. “No, I am the head of a humble family—the very first Viscount Pendragon, in fact.”

“At such a young age?”

“Yes, thanks to Arisa and our other companions, I was just promoted quite recently.”

The gentleman looked startled by the contrast between my visible age and rank.

Luckily, he seemed to believe me, and switched to a more polite tone.

“I take it you have come alone to discuss Lady Arisa?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“In spite of what His Highness said, there are none but the Farmar family who would agree. If you have come to request my persuasion on the matter, I am afraid that would only be in vain.”

Oh, he’s got the wrong idea...

“No, that isn’t why I’ve come.”

The gentleman looked puzzled.

“I want to free Arisa and Lulu from their status as slaves.”

“...Impossible. Are you familiar with the terrible curse known as a Geist, Viscount?”

“Yes, Arisa told me about it.”

The elderly man heaved a sigh. “A Geist can only be undone by the one who set it in motion. The imperial mage who placed the Geist on Lady Arisa and company betrayed Kuvork Kingdom before its destruction and joined Yowork Kingdom, and now works there in an important position.”

Oh, then this should go more quickly than I expected.

“Is this mage in Yowork Kingdom now?”

“That I cannot say for certain. However, I would certainly wager that he is in Yowork Castle. Though there are rumors that Yowork Kingdom is aiding the rebel army in Vistall Duchy, it is highly unlikely that he would be dispatched there.”

“It is?”

If this guy can put a Geist on people, I bet he’d be able to enslave enemy troops in battle and so on.

“Indeed. He once told me in the days of the Kuvork Kingdom that there are many conditions to using a Geist. It is no small feat to meet all of those conditions on a battlefield.”

Now that was news to me.

It made sense, though: If you could use a Geist on other people without any conditions, this imperial mage might have made himself king by now, and certainly could have made Yowork Kingdom a lot stronger.

“What are those conditions?”

The elderly gentleman looked at me appraisingly before answering my question.

“There are four conditions to use a Geist: the magic power of a hundred mages, an intricate magic circle as big as this mansion, a Xanthic Staff, and the consent of the target. I do not know if all four conditions are truly necessary, but it is not the sort of thing one could use on an opposing army in battle.”

I see. So when I go up against this mage, I’d better keep an eye out for the magic circle and staff, and be careful not to accidentally agree to anything.

“Will you be going to Yowork Kingdom?”

As I recorded these notes in my menu’s memo tab, the man questioned me.

“Yes, I intend to go meet this imperial mage.”

“That nation can be rather closed-off. They may not be willing to tell you where he is, even if you show up at the castle doors.”

That wouldn’t be a problem in my case since I could use “Search Entire Map.”

But since it seemed like he wanted to say something else, I went along with his warning.

“That is concerning, to be sure.”

“If you wish, I would be glad to help you.”

“Help me? How so?”

“I have a few connections in that kingdom. I can get you a map, and introduce you to a peddler who travels between Kageus City and Yowork Kingdom.”

“I would appreciate that.”

A peddler could tell us about any sightseeing spots on the way, and maybe

even some hidden gems and local specialties.

Still, I doubted he was making this offer out of simple kindness.

“In that case, what could I do to repay your generosity?”

The man looked faintly scornful at my direct question, though he hid it with a smile.

“Anything you could offer as a tip toward Sir Eruus’s aspirations would be much appreciated, I confess.”

Huh?

I expected him to ask me to get Eruus’s Geist lifted. Instead, he just asked me to hand over a bit of funds or supplies for the restoration of Kuvork Kingdom.

Of course, since Eruus was related to Arisa, I was planning on getting his Geist lifted either way.

“I’d be happy to offer some aid.”

I put a Magic Bag on the table.

I’d acquired it in the ruins in Lessau County. It could hold about twice as much as a large dresser.

“Please accept the bag and all of its contents. I hope it can help with the restoration of Kuvork Kingdom.”

The bag contained two thousand gold coins in pouches, as well as some magic weapons and armor with a military look, various potions, and Pure-Water Bags made with water stones, which were convenient for long marches.

I didn’t include things like Fire Rods and explosives that could be used for indiscriminate acts of violence, though.

“I-incredible...”

Once the old consul looked through the contents of the bag, he stared between the bag and my face several times over.

“...Sir Pendragon, if you are offering all this to Sir Eruus, does this mean you wish us to take Lady Arisa back as a member of the royal family...?”

His voice trembled as he asked my true intentions. I guess it must have seemed like a huge gift to a kingdom in the middle of rebuilding, though it was nothing special to me.

“As I said before, I have no ambitions of making Arisa queen or attempting any kind of puppet regime over the Kuvork Kingdom. This is merely a gift to her older brother.”

If they were willing to accept Arisa as a royal, I’d certainly appreciate that, but not if it meant Arisa would lose her freedom in the process.

If possible, I just wanted Arisa and Eruus to be able to see each other without any issues. I wasn’t going to use money to strong-arm them into it and pave the way for future problems, though.

“Please accept it. I promise you I have no ulterior motives.”

“...We appreciate your kindness dearly, Viscount.”

The gentleman bowed his head deeply.

They must have been hurting for cash more than I realized. The man looked pleased as punch while he wrote me a letter of introduction to his connections in Yowork Kingdom.

He said he would have a map copied and sent to our inn, as well as to the peddler in question.

I stood up once I received the letter.

Oops, I almost forgot.

“Could I ask you one last question?”

“What is it?”

“Do you mind telling me the name of that imperial mage?”

As long as I knew his name, I could look him up using my map search.

“Orchidee. These days, he goes by the family name of Matossh that he earned for selling out the royal family.”

I thanked the elderly gentleman for the information and left their base behind.



"...Your report?"

"Viscount Pendragon went directly back to the inn. It didn't look like he intended to go back out, so I left the rest to the guards watching the inn."

The young male noble responded to the elderly consul.

I remembered what I'd seen from the shadows as I listened in on their conversation.

I'd noticed the young nobleman tailing me from their base and hid a near-undetectable Shadowdive Bat in his shadow to investigate his intentions.

"Your Excellency, we should eliminate the witch and her companions under cover of darkness."

The gentleman stared coldly without responding to the boy's words.

For my part, I carefully controlled my anger toward the young man, lest he sense it through the Shadowdive Bat.

"We mustn't wait until that bastard puts the witch into power and spreads her influence."

The boy continued spouting nonsense.

I get what he was worried about, but there was no need to spread her influence. If Arisa really wanted to rebuild Kuvork Kingdom, I could make that happen anytime I wanted.

"I understand your concerns. Yet I cannot approve a surprise attack."

"Why not?!"

"Because you would all be killed."

A military man who'd been in the room this whole time spoke up to answer his question.

According to my map, he was a respectable level 38.

"General! How can you be such a coward?!"

"A coward? That's rich coming from someone who got knocked down a peg by

a couple of brats.”

“I—I was just careless, that’s all.”

“Keep making excuses, and you’ll end up dead next time.”

The young man scowled at the general’s words.

“Those people are strong, make no mistake. Especially the scalefolk girl. I could fight her ten times and lose every time, no doubt. From what I gather, she’s every bit as strong as the Shiga Eight Swordsmen member I once met.”

Ooh, he could tell all that without the “Analyze” skill? Very impressive.

“Th-then we just need to capture that homely girl and blackmail the rest of them. Surely the witch’s maid is weak enough to...”

“She’d still destroy you, I guarantee it.”

“Do you make a mockery of me?!”

“I only state the truth. That girl is skilled, too, if not as much as the scalefolk woman. You can tell just by the way she moved when they fought your people.”

I forced myself to keep listening without voicing my many complaints about the boy’s inability to appreciate Lulu’s supreme beauty.

“Possam, is this true of the viscount as well?”

The man hesitated before responding to the elderly gentleman’s question.

“...I can’t say for sure. He doesn’t look strong, and yet my instincts scream at me not to mess with him no matter what.”

Rude. That makes me sound like some kind of monster.

“Sir Rukuubho, you must not lay a hand on Viscount Pendragon and his companions. That man will surely be of use to Sir Eruus. And the same is true of Lady Arisa, of course.”

Scowling, the young man reluctantly agreed to the old man’s warning and left the room.

“Possam, make sure they don’t do anything foolish.”

“Very well.”

“While they might not be capable of causing much trouble, the last thing we need is for them to displease the viscount and let His Highness lose a valuable ally.”

At any rate, it seemed like we didn’t have to worry about the young man and his friends doing anything stupid.

Still, while I was pretty sure they would keep him under control, I kept the bats I summoned on guard around our inn so that we could sleep soundly, just in case.

[Journey to Yowork Kingdom](#)

Satou here. It must be incredibly stressful to be in a position where your every decision affects the lives of countless people. In a way, I feel like I can understand how you might get the urge to trust strange consultants or psychics and so on.

“Is that the border?”

After I got the information from the elderly consul, I headed for Yowork Kingdom.

I flew through the sky under cover of darkness, using Create Stone Object and seal slates to create teleport points as I went.

“It’s like they’re preparing for all-out war...”

Bonfires were blazing at the fort on the border, with sentries marching around even in the middle of the night.

I crossed the border from far off the highway, and used the Search Entire Map spell to load up on information about Yowork Kingdom.

First and foremost, there was no one in the territory with the Geist spell.

The name the gentleman gave me, Orchidee Matossh, didn’t come up with any hits, either, nor did the family name by itself. I didn’t even see a mansion that might belong to him.

“Either he’s traveling with the army, or he’s using an item to disguise himself like that cardinal...”

The other possibility was that he was hiding in one of the blank zones within the territory that constituted separate map areas.

Once I set up a base for teleportation in the kingdom, I traveled on to Vistall Duchy and searched there as well. Sure enough, I still didn’t find the imperial mage in question.

Annoying as it was, it looked like my only option was to enter Yowork Kingdom the normal way and ask around for his whereabouts.

I added one more teleport point close to the capital of Yowork Kingdom, then used the Earth Magic spell Create House to make a mostly underground safe house there. It came out a little fortress-like, only to keep out monsters, not for any other reason.



“Arisa, it’s much too dangerous to go to Yowork Kingdom! You should wait here in the city with me.”

“I’m sorry, big brother.”

Two days after I investigated Yowork Kingdom, we were at the main gates of Kageus City, where Eruus, Ben, and some of the others were seeing us off.

“We really oughtta go with ya, Lady Arisa.”

“I appreciate it, Ben. But you should stay here and keep supporting Eruus.”

Ben and his family all wanted to come with Arisa, but in the end she convinced them with a “please” to promise that they’d stay with Eruus.

It took two days before our departure because Countess Kageus learned of our visit and invited us to a banquet at her castle.

I was sincerely impressed that the chefs had such a wide repertoire based around mutton. The sausage and their locally made ale were especially delicious, and I’m not even a big fan of ale, normally.

“The mutton yesterday was delicious,” I mused aloud.

“Aye!”

“Pochi could eat Mr. Mutton every night, sir!”

“It was truly divine. In addition to all of the sausage varieties, the stew made with sinewy mutton meat had a wonderful mouthfeel.”

The beastfolk girls seemed equally taken with the mutton dishes.

“I think I can figure out most of the recipes. We’ll have to try and recreate them.”

“Yes, Lulu. I wish to eat the mutton stew again, I report.”

“Baked potato.”

Nana and Mia chimed in with their own requests, and the other kids all started listing the dishes they wanted Lulu and me to make, too. For some reason, Pochi requested hamburg steak, which wasn't even part of the previous night's lineup.

“Master, I'm ready.”

“You're done saying good-bye already?”

“It's not like it's our final farewell. We can always come see them again.”

Arisa looked a little relieved. I nodded, and we left Kageus City behind.



“Whew, what a feast! Hope I didn't eat you out of house and home.”

“Not at all. I appreciated the chance to hear more about other nations.”

We had lunch in a plaza near the main road with a traveling merchant who'd just returned from Yowork Kingdom.

“Well, be careful out there, kids. Yowork Kingdom's a dangerous place these days.”

The friendly merchant waved as he walked away.

“We got some good information there.”

“Yeah, I'm glad we found out ahead of time that they're not officially at war with Shiga Kingdom.”

From what we'd just been told, Yowork Kingdom was aiding the rebellion in Vistall Duchy; however, they were really just helping them eliminate thieves who were pretending to be part of the Shiga Kingdom army, so they weren't officially enemies. Thus, Shiga Kingdom merchants like the one we just met were still allowed to cross the borders and do business, he said.

The peddler the elderly gentleman introduced me to had given me information, too. But since he hadn't been to Yowork Kingdom since before their army joined the battle, getting the latest information was a big deal.

We enjoyed traveling by carriage to the border, then took a shortcut from there to the teleport point I made.

“Fortress?”

“Master, is this fortress our destination? I inquire.”

Mia and Nana spotted the safe house I made first.

I nodded. “I figured this safe house could be our base for investigating Yowork Kingdom.”

“A safe house? This?”

It sure looks like a fortress to me, Arisa’s eyes seemed to say.

“Just to be safe. There are monsters in the area.”

“Preeey?”

“Pochi wants to hunt, sir!”

“First, we need to secure the safe house, you two.”

“Aye.”

“Yes, sir.”

At Liza’s prompting, the two headed for the safe house.

For some reason, they were acting like they needed to secure the perimeter or something. I’m not sure why they seemed to think there might be traps or jump scares just around the corner... Did they get “safe house” and “fun house” mixed up, maybe?

“Lulu, let’s go.”

“Right! I’m coming.”

I called out to Lulu, who was gazing up at the watchtower that was camouflaged with leaves and branches.

As a skilled sniper, she probably couldn’t help being distracted by possible sniping positions.

We entered the fort and relaxed in the well-lit reception room, which had a glass ceiling.

“Are we venturing into the capital tomorrow?”

“No, I was going to go right after a quick break.”

“By yourself, you mean?”

At Arisa’s words, the group all looked at me, a little worried.

“No, I figured I’d bring two escorts along.”

After a bit of debate among the girls, I chose Liza and Nana, who were less likely to be looked down on by strangers at a glance.

Arisa and Lulu wanted to come, since this concerned them directly, but I insisted that they stay behind, since they could get in trouble if any Yowork Kingdom people recognized them.



“The atmosphere here is very heavy.”

“Yes, Liza. It is like a war zone, I declare.”

Liza and Nana adjusted their hoods as they murmured quietly about the strict inspections taking place at the main gates of Yowork Kingdom’s capital.

Soon, it was our turn.

“Next, you there.”

A soldier beckoned to us.

The language of Yowork Kingdom was more like a dialect of the Kuvork Kingdom language than a distinct language of its own. It was close to Shigan language, too, though not as near identical. At any rate, I could understand it easily enough.

> Skill Acquired: “Yowork Language”

Although it didn’t seem strictly necessary to put skill points into this one, I figured it could be bad if I used a Kuvork Kingdom accent when I addressed royalty of Yowork Kingdom. Just to be safe, I put points into the “Yowork Language” skill and activated it.

“Let’s see your identification.”

I held up my explorers badge from Labyrinth City Celivera to the haughty-looking soldier.

“Labyrinth City, eh...?”

“Musta heard about the labyrinth and come here. Do these things come in silver, though?”

Another soldier peered over the first one’s shoulder.

“Oi, Hop! You were an explorer in Labyrinth City, yeah? You seen one o’ these before?”

“Ooh, don’t see that kinda explorers badge every day. That’s the explorers’ guild seal, all right. Rich folks and nobles get gold badges—maybe it’s a lower version o’ that?”

Apparently, he wasn’t familiar with the mithril badge.

“So yer passably rich, eh? Explains the fancy sword and nice clothes.”

“Entrance fee is three silver coins per person. Make sure that demi-human there ties her spear into its sheath with cord. You and that pretty lady better not cause any trouble in the city, either, or we’ll toss ya right into jail, got that?”

I handed over the silver coins, and the guards let us inside.

“Welcome to the Inn on Prosperity Hill!”

We were at the highest-rated inn in the Yowork Kingdom capital, according to the merchants.

While the inn was almost excessively luxurious, the manager was clearly the type to appraise guests from behind a bright smile. Even as we were going through the check-in process, I could tell she was inspecting our clothes and accessories with snakelike eyes.

That didn’t particularly bother me, although her treatment of demi-humans definitely did. She muttered “a tail, eh?” when she saw Liza’s peeking out from under her coat. There must be discrimination against demi-humans here, too, though the merchants’ information failed to mention it.

After a moment’s hesitation over this, I decided to stick with the plan to send

Nana and Liza out as messengers.

I needed them to offer high-quality gifts to the king to arrange for a meeting with him. Since they weren't officially at war with Shiga Kingdom, I went ahead and requested an audience as a Shigan noble, throwing in my position as Vice-Minister of Tourism for good measure.

Sure enough, I landed an audience at the castle, albeit in two days' time. That way I could search out the truth of the mage's whereabouts from within the castle.

While we waited in the inn, I used my summoned Shadowdive Bats and Space Magic to investigate, too, but didn't acquire any good information. All I learned were whispers of scandals, like an affair between the queen and the knights' captain, and like the few ministers who were misusing their authority in various unpleasant ways.

Now, then...

"Master, there are many golems, I report."

"They are similar to the weasels' piloted golems, though their exterior appearance is somewhat different."

Once we passed through the castle gates, our path was lined on either side by nearly a hundred knights and some thirty piloted golems like guards of honor. There were wyvern knights on standby near each of the four castle watchtowers, all looking down at us.

The wyvern mounts were being controlled with screws, another weapon of the Weaselman Empire, which they'd apparently made connections with via the Vistall Duchy rebel army.

"This is quite an elaborate welcome."

As we approached, a commanding officer blared out a note on a horn, and the golems all drew their swords with metallic clanks and created an impressive sword arch over the path.

Whoa, that's an impressive sight.

I was surprised to see that the king of Yowork Kingdom was receiving us with

such enthusiasm. I wished I could've recorded it on video. At the very least, I took some pictures of the sight.

"What a crude attempt at intimidation."

"Yes, Liza. This is not nearly enough power to threaten us, I appraise."

...Wait, so that wasn't just a fancy demonstration to welcome us? Oh well, whatever. I still enjoyed it.

I cleared my throat deliberately to reset my mood, and we strode elegantly beneath the sword arch like true nobles of the Shiga Kingdom.

Waiting at the end of the path in a full suit of armor was the knights' captain. Yes, the one having an affair with the queen.

"I appreciate the magnificent reception."

I sincerely meant my thanks.

"I am Count Horrhen Midnach, captain of the knights. We welcome your visitation, Viscount Pendragon, Shiga Kingdom's Vice-Minister of Tourism."

The cheating captain looked down on me as he spoke.

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on a muttered comment like, "This tiny infant is a vice-minister?" I couldn't blame him for being surprised, though.

He held out his right hand, and I accepted the handshake.

It was a strong one, too, given his "Herculean Strength" skill.

"Grr...nnggh..."

The handshake went on for an awkwardly long time, until the captain turned red-faced and started to groan.

Did I hurt him by accident? I only used roughly the same amount of grip strength as he did...

"W-well then, follow me. Right this way."

Pulling his hand away, the knights' captain turned on his heel and led the way into the castle.

With our friendly greeting over, we followed his lead. The knights who had

lined up to greet us fell into step behind us as well. Guarding us, maybe?

“...It seems they are continuing their attempts to threaten us. But their glares are weak.”

Guess I misread the situation again.

“Yes, Liza. Master, may I show them what true intimidation looks like? I request.”

Yeah, please don't.

I shook my head at Nana fervently.

As we continued to follow the knights' captain, I observed the architecture and art with interest, as it was different from that of Shiga Kingdom. The maids and officials wore clothes of a somewhat different style, too. They looked a little unsophisticated to me; maybe the quality of the fabric was lacking, or they just weren't very well put-together.

We arrived in the audience hall, and at the knights' captain's instruction, bowed our heads to await the king.

“The king of Yowork Kingdom, rightful heir to the Great Eldohk Kingdom, His Majesty King Usarserkis is heeere!”

The king's arrival was announced in an unnecessarily musical tone. I kept my head down and snuck a peek.

The monarch was carried into the room on a palanquin by slaves. He looked emaciated, possibly due to some illness. I wondered if there were drugs or poison involved, but his only status condition was an alcohol addiction.

I later learned that the “Great Eldohk Kingdom” was a name from long ago when all of these small nations were one a large kingdom.

“Viscount Pendragon, Vice-Minister of Tourism of the Shiga Kingdom, raise your head.”

When I looked directly into the king's eyes, they were blazing and unfocused, as if he was feverish and barely conscious.

“Hmph. So youthful. Did you buy up the youth-restoring elixir of the Saga

Empire? Do you carry the blood of the fairy folk?"

I certainly wish fairies and humans could have children. Unfortunately, my beloved Ms. Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest, told me it was impossible.

"...Or have they given some ordinary youth a fictitious role and sent you to mock me?"

"None of the above."

I removed a couple medals from my ceremonial robe—the rarest (the Shiga Kingdom medal for defeating a dragon) and the one that might have the most name recognition (the mithril medal)—and held them up for the king's inspection. The latter was a medal I received along with my mithril explorers badge.

The officer behind the king seemed to recognize them; he whispered to his minister boss, who relayed it to the king.

"...A dragon medal? You defeated a dragon?!"

"I only aided Sir Hayato the Hero of the Saga Empire in doing so."

I had actually done so myself once, but saying so would seem like a boldfaced lie, so I went ahead and dropped Hayato's name instead.

But the king wasn't listening to my modest clarification.

"A dragon, eh?! Damn those dragons!"

He stood up unsteadily from his throne and nearly fell over, prompting his retainers to support his weight.

"Pendragon! Become my vassal! I will give you the title of count!"

It seemed that this king had some kind of fixation or history with dragons, judging by his desperate expression as he tried to recruit me.

"With a knight who can defeat dragons at my side, I could reunite the splintered pieces of Eldohk into one nation, and perhaps even ascend to the title of the Great King of Eldohk! Nay, not perhaps—the title would be mine at last! The Great King! I shall achieve my destiny!"

This was getting a little scary. Was he on some dangerous drug or something?

“Your Majesty, please calm yourself.”

“Myude...but I am to become—”

“Yes, your Majesty. I am sure you will.”

Myude, a busty woman in a veil, rushed to the king’s side and whispered some sort of spell.

Oh yikes, she’s a Psychic Magic user.

The veil was a powerful recognition-inhibiting Magic Item, making it difficult to read her information with “Analyze.” According to my AR display, though, she belonged to the Phantom Peach Orchard organization.

Judging by her skills, she was probably some kind of spy or criminal. By searching the maps of places I’d already visited, I found members in the royal capital of Shiga Kingdom and most other capital cities. None of the others were Psychic Magic users, however. I put a marker on her, just to be safe.

At some point soon, I would have to write a letter to the former Count Poputema or the prime minister and ask if they knew anything about the organization. Maybe I could even use Summon Pigeon to do it.

While I was lost in thought, the king retired from the room, due to his poor health.

“The king of Yowork Kingdom, rightful heir to the Great Eldohk Kingdom, His Majesty King Usarserkis has lefffft!”

“Pendragon! Come back to the castle tomorrow! Swear it!”

The king bellowed at me as he was carried away, nearly tumbling out of his palanquin.

“Sir Pendragon, despite what His Majesty said, his whims are rather changeable,” the knights’ captain warned me. “Don’t set your hopes too high for tomorrow.”

That was fine, since I had no interest in serving him anyway.

More importantly...

“I wish to meet with the imperial mage Sir Orchidee. Could I ask you to

arrange it?”

I decided to get into the real reason I came.

He didn't seem to be in the castle, but that in itself might be secret information, which is why I figured I'd ask to meet him.

“Orchidee? Are you close with Sir Matossh, Sir Pendragon?”

The captain's expression was somewhat unpleasant.

“No, we have never been acquainted. I came here to give him a message from a friend, as well as a staff.”

I gave the excuse I'd come up with in advance by using my “Fabrication” skill, and showed the captain a staff from the belongings that had been taken into custody when we entered the audience hall. It was a fairly powerful long staff made from a Mountain-Tree branch.

I'd attached a large blue crystal containing a water stone to effectively give it a mystical air.

Overall, it was stronger than those used by the lower-ranking Shiga Thirty-Three Staves members with red belts, though not as strong as the ones Arisa and Mia used.

“Amazing...”

The imperial mages who were present in the room gathered around as if transfixed.

“I shall take responsibility and bring it to Sir Matossh.”

“No, I'll do it.”

For some reason, it seemed oddly popular. I guess looks are important for staves, too.

“Sir Matossh is not in the royal castle?”

“Lady Myude used her feminine wiles to get him demoted.”

“That burnt-up ruin of a castle is a perfect match for that lousy mage.”

“You were told to keep that information top secret, dammit!”

It appeared that Orchidee had been sent away to some ruined castle.

Come to think of it, there was a good chance that was the former Kuvork Kingdom capital. Arisa told me that demons destroyed the castle and its surrounding town and burned up her villa.

I decided to go ahead and ask outright.

“Do you mean the capital of Kuvork Kingdom, by any chance?”

At that, several of the less subtle mages suddenly had “uh-oh” written all over their faces.

“Sorry, that’s top-secret information. We can take a message for you, but we can’t tell you where to find him.”

“I see... Please do relay this message, then. ‘We kept our end of the bargain. You keep yours.’”

Rather than keep pressing for information until I started to look suspicious, I pretended to accept it and gave the nearest mage the staff, as well as a vague message that could be interpreted any number of ways.

Since the staff itself was just a dummy made for this occasion, it didn’t matter to me if he kept it for himself.

I left the royal castle with all the information I needed.

That night, I used the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Mirror to contact Hikaru in the royal capital.

Since you could see each other’s faces while talking, it was preferable over the Space Magic spell Telephone for talking to Hikaru, Miss Aaze, and our friends on Paradise Island, Rei and Yuuneia.

“Phantom Peach Orchard...”

“Yeah, one of their members seems to be controlling the king of Yowork Kingdom with Psychic Magic.”

“I didn’t know that group was still around.”

Hikaru looked less than pleased.

I’d brought it up to have her ask the prime minister for me, but Hikaru herself

seemed to be familiar with the name.

“You know them?”

“Didn’t I mention it the other day? We were talking about how there was a group in the Flue Empire that could use Shadow Mirror, remember?”

Come to think of it, that did sound familiar.

“This one lady they called Myude the Undying Witch managed to get in with some powerful people in the Flue Empire and caused all kinds of trouble. Psychic Magic was her specialty—maybe she passed down her spellbook to the organization or something.”

“The lady messing with King Yowork was named Myude, too.”

“Oh, geez. Maybe she inherited the name as well as the spellbook? I can’t imagine the same lady could still be alive now... You might want to be careful, though.”

“Yeah. I will.”

Since there were youth-restoring potions and long-lived races in this world, and even Hikaru herself used a sort of magical cold sleep to survive a long time, it wasn’t completely impossible.

“It seems like they might be trying to take root in Shiga Kingdom, too. Can you warn the king and the prime minister?”

I used my map search to give Hikaru information about the Phantom Peach Orchard members and secret hideouts I found there.

That should take care of the Shiga Kingdom side, at least.

Just as the knights’ captain predicted, the king didn’t call me back to the castle.

I’m guessing the Psychic Magic user Myude made him forget about me somehow.

While I was a little concerned that she was controlling this kingdom from the shadows, right now tracking down Orchidee was more important.

Surely the people of this kingdom could handle their own problems.

Still, I couldn't resist meddling a little: I sent an anonymous tip that "Myude the Witch is controlling the king with Psychic Magic" to the knights' captain and a few imperial mages via the Space Magic spell Material Transfer. Hopefully it wouldn't just result in her getting her claws into them, too.



"So this is the former Kuvork capital..."

Pursuing the imperial mage Orchidee, I went alone to investigate the former royal capital of Kuvork Kingdom, now known as Kuvork City.

Since the former Kuvork Kingdom was its own map, I used "Search Entire Map" again, but still didn't find Orchidee in the city.

"This place really is in shambles, huh...?"

Using my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance, I inspected the city and found all kinds of criminal activity, with many people living on the streets. Trash and filth were piled up in the alleyways, and sometimes even decomposing corpses. The majority of citizens of the fallen Kuvork Kingdom seemed to be treated as slaves.

The guards were dirty, too, openly demanding bribes.

Only the Yowork Kingdom soldiers seemed to have any kind of power.

In search of information about Orchidee, I went to a bar where those soldiers gathered.

"Another moron tried to sneak into the labyrinth."

When I walked into the bar, my ears were assailed by the rowdy voices of the soldiers.

I kept my presence hidden and sat at the far end of the bar, ordered a drink from a passing barmaid with heavy makeup, and listened to their conversations.

"These idiots never learn, do they? We've warned them so many times that the labyrinth is blocked off, and only us Yowork Kingdom soldiers are allowed to enter."

"No, apparently it was a Yowork noble this time."

“For real? Wish they’d join the army and protect that creepy mage or something instead, then.”

“That bastard Matossh has been hiding out in the labyrinth ever since he got into that fight with the general.”

Well, I got that information more easily than I expected.

From the look of it, he was up to something inside a sealed labyrinth.

“No, not him. I mean his creepy successor who showed up half a year ago.”

“That guy hasn’t been seen in at least a month, either.”

“Oh, good. Hope those bastards never come out.”

“No wonder us aboveground troops haven’t gotten word about changing shifts.”

“Yeah, the general’s hangers-on only care about leveling up themselves...”

Evidently there were some troops in the labyrinth. I should still be able to sneak in easily with the use of my transparency cloak and “Skyrunning,” no doubt.

“By the way, have you heard the rumors?”

“What, about the wandering ghosts?”

“Yeah, that! The ghosts of the fallen royals!”

“Are they supposed to be royalty from Kuvork or something?”

“That’s what I hear. Probably ’cause they sacrificed the royal family to revive the labyrinth, or so the story goes.”

“So what, the ghosts are searching for the retainers that betrayed them?”

“What a bunch of idiots.”

“Who, the ghosts?”

“All of ’em. The dirty traitors, and the ghosts who don’t even know that King Userserkis already executed ’em all.”

Huh. So the retainers who betrayed Arisa’s family were already long gone.

I doubt Arisa would be the type to seek revenge, but I personally was hoping to make them apologize for betraying her. Oh well, I guess it doesn't matter if they're already dead.

"Maybe this place?"

Now that I had the information I needed, I stopped off at a bar frequented by former citizens of Kuvork Kingdom.

Hearing that ghost story gave me the urge to take Arisa and Lulu to visit their family graves, so I figured I'd try to find out where they were from some of the locals.

"Welcome! You gotta pay Yowork copper coins up front for ale. No Kuvork coins!"

As soon as I entered, I was given this information from a scantily clad barmaid. Despite her provocative dress, her face was round and youthful. She was around Lulu's age, in fact.

"Do you have wine or mead?"

"Not from around here, are you, mister? It's a half silver coin for a glass of watered-down wine. We don't have any mead."

"I'll take the wine, please. And some snacks with the change."

Without answering about my origins, I paid using a Saga Empire silver coin from my Storage.

Since their silver coins were on the larger side, it should be worth more than a half silver coin from Yowork Kingdom.

"Order up, boss! Wine and a heaping helping of snacks!"

The barmaid bit the coin to test if it was real, then stashed it away in her cleavage and ran off to the kitchen.

"Damn those Yowork Kingdom bastards."

"You said it. Workin' us to the bone for next to nothin'!"

"At least they pay you at all. Our boss doesn't give us a damn cent."

As soon as I started eavesdropping under the pretense of waiting for my

order, I immediately heard some work complaints.

A lot of people chimed in to agree. Unsurprisingly, the people from the former Kuvork Kingdom seemed to have a lot of stress and unhappiness built up.

“If you complain to the guards, they’ll just insult you or beat you up. Best you can do is cry yourself to sleep.”

“I miss the old days of the Kuvork Kingdom...”

“Hey, just between you and me...I heard there’s a survivor of the Kuvork royal family in Shiga Kingdom.”

For a moment, I thought they might mean Arisa or Lulu, until I realized it must be Eruus.

“What?! S’tat true?!”

“It’s true, all right. One of the princes is gathering forces to take the kingdom back from those Yowork bastards, they say.”

Apparently, this was one of Eruus’s henchmen that the elderly consul told me about. That was probably why he knew so much.

Although I didn’t catch his name, he must be one of the men sent out to gather support for the resistance on the ground.

“Glad it’s a prince. If that witch was alive, I’d make her eat dirt myself.”

“Hey, don’t call her that! The hidden princess only ever tried to make life better for us!”

“What, the so-called Hidden Princess of Prosperity? That ‘fertilizer’ of hers only attracted monsters and rotted our fields. Some prosperity she brought us.”

“The princess was just being used by a pawn of the Yowork Kingdom!”

Some of them seemed to resent Arisa, while others defended her.

“Hmph! What can a cursed purple-haired freak even do?! She was even stupid enough to make that hideously ugly girl her lady’s maid!”

The waitress chimed in with the drunken patrons, her voice dark with resentment.

The former must be referring to Arisa, which meant the latter must be Lulu. I had almost forgotten by now that most people in this world considered Lulu's looks unattractive. This girl didn't look like she'd worked at the castle; maybe she knew Lulu from when she lived in town?

As much as it irked me to hear insults about Arisa and Lulu, right now I needed information.

"Settle down, everyone. The tab's on me tonight. Go on and drink as much as you like to forget your troubles."

I lightened the mood in the room by buying drinks for everyone.

After all, I couldn't get any information out of them if they got bummed out and went home.

"Never seen your face around before, mister."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Akindoh, a traveling merchant."

Eruus's covert agent came over to investigate me, so I introduced myself under one of my aliases and discreetly showed him the papers I got from the elderly consul.

"Oh-ho, a merchant! Got any moneymaking tips for me? I'll tell ya whatever you wanna know in exchange."

"That would be great."

He must have figured out from the papers that I was connected to Eruus.

"...You want to know where His Majesty and the old royal family are buried?" Tilting his head, the man turned to the rest of the crowd and shouted. "Does anyone know?"

Unfortunately, none of them had an answer.

"Oh, I know!"

Except for the waitress who'd been bad-mouthing Arisa and Lulu.

"Where is it?"

"Hmm, let me thiiink..."

The girl jiggled her modest chest in a clumsy attempt at seduction.

“If you’ll buy a night with me for three silver coins, maybe I’ll tell you with some pillow talk.”

I guess the waitresses here worked double duty as prostitutes.

I had no intention of sleeping with an underage girl, whether it was for information-gathering or not.

“Sorry, I only need the information.”

“Heh-heh, looks like you got shot down.” Another woman said to the girl before turning her attention to me. “Wanna spend the night with me instead, sweetie?”

“Oh, shut up! You just keep drinking your booze!” The barmaid scowled at the customer, then at me. “If you only want the information, it’ll be one gold coin!”

I must have put her in a bad mood.

She was probably trying to be unreasonable, but that amount of money made no difference to me.

“You’ve got a deal.”

I put a gold coin on the table.

When the girl reached out to snatch it up, I caught her hand and added, “*after* you give me the information.”

I got the feeling she was going to run off with the money otherwise.

“Tch. Fine, the graves are on a hill behind the old castle. Should be easy enough to spot—it’s the one place where grass doesn’t grow.”

The barmaid grumpily gave up the information.

I thanked her and handed over the gold coin.

“How’d you know that?” one of the customers asked.

“My dad’s dead brother’s wife is buried there, apparently. Just ’cause she used to take care of them, he spent what little money we had to find out where the grave is from a Yowork soldier,” she grumbled. “We wouldn’t have had to

starve so much if he didn't waste money like that..."

Still muttering, she retreated into the galley.

I went back to the soldiers' bar and gathered more information, confirming that the executed king and queen, as well as their chief vassals, were all buried behind the castle of the former Kuvork Kingdom. Their closest attendants, maids, pages, and so on were buried in the same grave.

Time to check this place out for myself.

The royal castle of the lost Kuvork Kingdom was on a small hill in the center of the city.

"They left this area in ruins, huh...?"

The castle and the nearby nobles' quarters had been burned to the ground in a disastrous fire caused by demons; debris was still scattered everywhere, possibly from some kind of explosion.

More than half of the castle itself was burnt and crumbling away, presumably from the demon attack Arisa mentioned.

The castle towers had taken the worst damage. They looked like they had been pierced by missiles or some type of attack. One of the towers had been torn clean off and sank into the ground.

Urk...

There must have been a noble prisoner confined in the top floor of the tower or something, because the glimpses of the room I saw through the broken rock showed wild writing all over the wall, painting a grim picture of the prisoner's sanity.

I paused for a moment of silence to pray for the departed soul to rest in peace, then moved on.

"This must be the place..."

Just as the barmaid said, it was easy to identify the location of the graves.

One section of the hill was bare of grass, with nothing growing except a few sparse weeds. The dirt was piled a bit higher, though there were no markers or

any other indicators that it was a grave. The hole had been dug and filled in—nothing more.

I decided to at least make a gravestone before I brought Arisa and the others here.

Producing a solid meteorite from Storage, I used the Earth Magic spell Create Stone Object to make a gravestone. It was a little difficult to carve the sturdy space rock, even with the spell.

Now that I knew where it was, I used the Return spell to go back and get the others.



“So this is their grave...”

“How awful. They left the castle and the nobles’ quarters all burned up from the demon attack.”

I returned to the grave with my group in tow.

Arisa and Lulu were quiet as we walked closer, far from bursting into tears like I half-expected.

“Arisa.”

“Thanks, Mia.”

Mia handed a bouquet of flowers to Arisa, who placed them in front of the grave.

“Lulu, the incense.”

“Thank you, Liza.”

Liza lit the incense and passed it to Lulu.

I made the incense at Arisa’s request, along with a string of prayer beads.

“We pray at graves by putting our hands together and wishing for the soul to rest in peace, I declare.”

“Aye.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tama and Pochi followed Nana's example, meekly putting their hands together. I lit the incense in the incense burner and joined the others in praying for the departed.

Even after the rest of us finished our prayers, Arisa and Lulu kept their eyes closed and their hands pressed together.

They probably had a lot to tell their lost family members.

"...That should do it."

"Thank you for waiting."

Finally, the pair finished their prayers with the faintest trace of tears in their eyes.

"You sure?"

"Yep, I did plenty of praying."

"And I said my farewells to my mother."

I took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from their eyes.

"Thank you, Master... This place is awfully bleak, though, isn't it?"

Arisa looked around the gravesite.

Shoot. I should've planted some flowers when I made the gravestone.

"Master, could I borrow a Treespirit Pearl?"

"Of course. Need some seeds, too?"

"Ah-ha-ha, you're always a step ahead of me."

We all started planting flowers around the grave.

"Lulu, let's do this part together."

"Okay."

Arisa held out the pearl and beckoned to Lulu, who put her hand on top of her sister's.

"Treespirit Pearl, lend us your power. For Mother, Father, my brothers, Lili, and all the others..."

Arisa and Lulu held up the pearl together.

““...Let this place be filled with flowers!””

Magic flowed from their hands into the Treespirit Pearl and spread out across the ground.

“Flowerrrs?”

“So pretty, sir.”

The seeds sprouted into beautiful flowers of all colors of the rainbow.

It was heartbreakingly lovely, a perfect expression of the sisters’ tender feelings for the departed.

“Satou.”

Mia tugged on my sleeve.

A young man stood among the flowers, his body see-through.

He had soft features and long black hair, the kind of boy you’d find in any romantic *shojo* manga from the Showa era. While his posture and appearance suggested a flippant attitude, there was a hint of sorrow in his expression.

He seemed too young to be Arisa’s and Lulu’s father. An older brother, maybe?

“Nisnarch...,” Lulu murmured.

On the other hand, when Arisa saw the man, she shouted his name with obvious rage. “Nisnarch!”

A shimmering wall appeared between Nisnarch and the rest of us, likely the Space Magic spell Deracinator.

Moments later, he was surrounded by floating fireballs.

“You’ve got some nerve showing your face here after you betrayed us and sold away our kingdom!”

It seemed that this very man was the traitorous retainer who brought down Arisa and the rest of the royal family.

“Nisnarch was one of the people who helped Arisa with her reforms, along

with Ben and the others,” Lulu whispered to me.

“Go on, say something, will you?”

Despite her demand, Nisnarch just went on staring at Arisa in silence.

“Or can you not talk anymore, now that you’re a ghost?”

Arisa slowly moved the floating fireballs closer to Nisnarch.

When they were close enough to warm his skin, Nisnarch finally opened his mouth.

“...Looks like the demons did their job well.”

His voice echoed oddly through the field of flowers.

“Well?” Arisa repeated sharply. “Does that mean *you’re* the one who sent the demons to burn down the castle and the villa?”

Nisnarch simply nodded. *“Lady Arisa, I beg you. Please save the souls of His Majesty and the others.”*

Arisa’s brows shot up.

“What kind of request is that coming from a traitor?”

“I do not ask you to forgive me. I am willing to burn for all eternity for my crimes.”

“That’s good to hear. In fact, I’ll burn you up myself, soul and all.”

The fireballs crept even closer to Nisnarch.

“If that is what you wish, I will gladly accept my punishment. But first, there is something I must tell you.”

Her eyes cold, Arisa jerked her chin for him to continue.

“The spirits of His Majesty and all those who were used to revive the labyrinth are still trapped and suffering inside the Dungeon Core. Please, I beg you to save them.”

“You want us to destroy the core at the very deepest part of the labyrinth? Do you realize what a ridiculous request you’re making?”

“I do... But with the help of the people behind you, I suspect that you can do

it.”

Nisnarch looked at me, Liza, and the rest of our group.

Arisa turned away from him and looked at me in a silent question. I nodded, of course.

“All right, fine. But don’t get the wrong idea! I’m not doing it because you asked me to. I don’t want to let Father and the rest of our family suffer like that, that’s all.”

Arisa waved her hand, and the fireballs around Nisnarch disappeared.

“Master, lend me a Holy Stone.”

Apparently, she wanted to send the traitor’s soul on peacefully instead of burning him away with Fire Magic.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s fine. He’s suffered enough.”

Arisa’s logic was sound and softhearted as always.

I produced a Holy Stone from Storage and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Master.”

The stone glowed blue with Arisa’s magic.

“Please wait, Lady Arisa.”

Nisnarch stopped her before she could send his soul on.

“I am a sinner. I betrayed your ideals and set into motion the destruction of our kingdom. I deserve to remain tied to this world in eternal suffering.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Very.”

Arisa and Nisnarch stared at each other.

“...Fine.”

With a short response, Arisa turned and walked away from the grave.

“You sure about this?”

“I’m sure.” Arisa’s voice was short. “He was always so stubborn...”

This last part was muttered so softly that I only picked it up with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“He was...your friend, was he?”

“...Yeah. Unlike Ben and the others, who helped carry out the farming experiments, he did all kinds of behind-the-scenes work for me. Finding room in the budget, convincing the nobles, finding places to conduct the experiments, that kind of thing.”

“Sounds like he was an excellent helper.”

“He was. But he was a little oblivious about people’s intentions. He was so occupied with chasing ideals that he fell for some stupid jerks’ bait—hook, line, and sinker. He ended up betraying me and accidentally set our whole kingdom up for a fall.”

Apparently, Arisa had a lot of enemies at the time: the king’s second wife, ministers trying to protect their own interests, and other influential people who begrudged Arisa’s work or were simply so superstitious that they feared her purple hair color. Nisnarch had always bustled around trying to mediate between them.

Arisa didn’t get into detail, but it seems an agent from the Yowork Kingdom took advantage of his good intentions and found ways to make her reforms fail time and time again, ruining her reputation in the process.

That just sounded like a mistake, not a downright betrayal. Nisnarch must have made some serious blunder to be seen as a traitor to Arisa.

“Look...forget about him.” Arisa shook her head as if to dismiss thoughts of the past. “Master, everyone...will you go to the labyrinth with me?”

“Of course,” I said, ruffling her hair. As if she even needed to ask.

It goes without saying that the rest of the group all unanimously agreed.

Interlude: A Skirmish

“Their skills are impressive. I suppose I should expect no less of the former army of the duchy, even if they have turned against their lord.”

“Yes, and their equipment is on par with the kingdom army’s, too. We would likely have struggled to defeat their knights without the help of the Champion’s Swords and Spears.”

The commander and vice-commander of the royal army’s advance party were discussing the rebel army they had just battled.

“The city where the first anti-rebellion squadron was crushed is up ahead, is it not...? Let us hope we can return to the royal capital before too long.”

“Is there something of import for you in the capital?”

“My daughter is due to give birth soon...”

The commanding officer hoped to celebrate the birth of his grandchild in person in the royal capital, not away on a battlefield.

“A report, sir! An unknown army of some thirty men has been spotted in the mountain path to the north!”

“That seems too little to be enemy reinforcements...”

“They were not flying the banner of Vistall Duchy, I am told.”

“...Mercenaries joining up with the rebel army, perhaps? Then we cannot let them pass. Send Sir Mavats and fifty of the reserve troops.”

On his orders, a squadron of fifty soldiers was sent forth to intercept.

“...They are far less skilled. Little more than civilian soldiers.”

The commander watched the battle begin to unfold in the north with a longscope. Losing interest, he returned his attention to the primary battle.

But just as he lowered the longscope, there was loud shouting from the

northern battlefield.

“Your Excellency! Look!”

At the vice-commander’s prompting, the commander looked back to the north with the longscope.

There, several warriors in unsightly evil-looking armor designed after dragons and demons were laying waste to the royal army’s soldiers. They must be using “Body Strengthening,” as they took out multiple men with each sweep of their enormous broadswords.

“Did those mercenaries bring some famous knights or something?”

“They’re probably fallen explorers, no doubt. But unluckily for them, our force has Sir Mavats and five other knights who will surely make short work of them.”

As soon as their intercepting force’s knights stepped up to take on the men in strange armor, the tides of the battle quickly turned.

“Sir Mavats received a Champion’s Sword from His Majesty himself, after all. His strength is...”

The vice-commander trailed off abruptly.

Even when Sir Mavats and the other Champion’s Sword-wielding knights sliced off the armored enemies’ arms or destroyed their swords, they continued fighting ceaselessly.

Caught off guard, the knights began to fall to the evil-armored figures.

“What in the world are they?”

“Corpse potion users, perhaps...?”

“A corpse potion would not grant such power. Don’t tell me—do they have Demonic Hearts?!”

The commander recalled the forbidden weapons carried by the attackers in the attempted assassination of Duke Vistall.

“Urgent report, sir! More reinforcements from the northwestern hills! They appear to have tamed monsters with them.”

Worse yet, there were at least a dozen more of the evil-armored warriors

with those reinforcements.

“They must be using those screws...”

“This is problematic.”

“Yes, we could be in a bit of trouble here. I am sure we can win, but we will lose more allies than I would like.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the commander quickly made a decision.

“We must not let too many men fall here. We retreat.”

The advance party began to withdraw at once—but it was too late.

Rebel knights on tamed naga mounts lay in wait to block their escape. They were twenty in number.

“Caught between the devil and the dragon, eh...? We’ll just have to smash our way out! Knights, to the front lines! Archers, support the knights’ advance with your arrows!”

Resigning himself to losing some of his forces, the commander sent his most powerful soldiers, the knights, to do battle with the formidable nagas.

The rebel knights used the fact that their mounts could fly to make their retreat even more difficult.

At this rate, the evil-armored fighters and the rest of the rebel army would catch up to them at the rear.

The commander’s stomach twisted in the face of a seemingly impossible predicament.

Just then, a savior arrived.

“Hi-ya-ha-haaaaaaa!”

A scythe flashed through the air with an arc of red light, slicing one of the naga riders in two, along with his steed.

A warrior in white armor began cutting down the nagas and knights alike with a vicious grin.

“The Shiga Eight...”

“A woman with a scythe—there’s no doubt about it! That must be Lady Ryuona, the Grass Cutter!”

The vice-commander cried out with joy as he pointed at the unexpected backup.

“Follow Lady Ryuona’s lead!”

“It is I, the Windblade, that I am!”

More warriors arrived, helping Ryuona take down the nagas and rebel army knights.

Each of them alone was strong enough to overshadow even the efforts of Sir Mavats, himself a Champion’s Sword wielder. One knight with red armor and an Ice Sword stood out especially, as did a swordsman with wind-imbued armor.

“Oh-ho, what’s this? Check out the sick armor on those guys!”

Having laid waste to the naga squadron, Ryuona set her sights on the evil-armored warriors who were snapping at the heels of the retreating advance party. They’d already slaughtered most of the rearguard soldiers and the knights who came running to stop them, but now they drew back as if in alarm when they saw the look in Ryuona’s eyes.

“Let’s gooooooooo!”

Ryuona began sprinting toward the evil-armored warriors at full tilt.

“Lady Ryuona! Those things are invincible! Be careful!”

“Got it! ...‘Death Guillotine’!”

With a swoop of red light, her scythe chopped one of the warriors in half, hideous armor and all.

“Pshh, they’re nothing special. Guys! Don’t let these losers intimidate you!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The Shiga Eight Swordsmen candidates who accompanied Ryuona began to cut down the evil-armored warriors, ice and wind flashing from their magic blades.

“I-incredible...”

“No wonder the Shiga Eight are the protectors of the kingdom...”

The seemingly invincible evil-armored warriors fell like any average soldier in the face of the overwhelming power of the Shiga Eight and potential candidates.

“...Back up Lady Ryuona and her men! We’ll take care of the lesser soldiers! Make sure you don’t hit any allies with stray arrows!”

On the commander’s orders, the advance party rallied back into formation.

Right as they collided head-on with the rebel army, Holy Knights on warhorses arrived on the battlefield, and the tide turned completely in their favor.

“It appears that victory in the first battle will go to the royal army after all.”

“Indeed. It seems the rebel army commander has chosen to retreat, too.”

A man at the rear of the rebel army who appeared to be the commander blew on a large flute to signal the retreat.

“It doesn’t look like Lady Ryuona intends to let them get away that easily, though.”

Having defeated the last of the evil-armored warriors, Ryuona was charging toward the rebel knights.

GYA0000000SZ.

A howl echoed from the northeastern hills.

“An enemy ambush?”

“It might be whatever destroyed the first anti-rebellion squadron.”

Ryuona and her company abandoned their attack on the rebel army knights and vanished toward the hills.

GYA0000000SZ.

The monster’s howl echoed, and the red flash of Ryuona’s special attack blazed from beyond the hills.

“As long as we have Lady Ryuona on our side, we need not fear, even if the rebel army has a hydra on theirs.”

The commander seemed to be reassuring himself as much as his vice-commander.

GYA0000000SZ.

There was a burst of flame beyond the hills, and Ryuona and her men were sent flying back in a cloud of black smoke.

“L-Lady Ryuona?!”

The vice-commander exclaimed in fear.

Covered in burn marks, Ryuona nevertheless stood up immediately. She and her company readied their weapons again as they looked up at the hills.

“Wh-what is one of *those* doing here...?”

The vice-commander’s voice trembled as the monster emerged from the hills.

With a reptilian face and bat-like wings, it was none other than...

“...a dragon.”

There were rumors, of course.

But almost no one believed them at face value.

After all, dragons almost never showed themselves to any but the strongest combatants.

“So, it’s true...”

Technically, it was a lesser dragon, though this was cold comfort to them.

They were all far too intimidated to make note of the fact that the dragon seemed to be wearing a droll hat, nor of the gaudily dressed man it carried in one hand.

“All forces, retreat! Run for your lives!”

While the vice-commander shook with fear, the commander put the safety of his soldiers first and called out the order.

GYA0000000SZ.

Behind them, the dragon spread its wings, and flames licked out of its jaws like a tongue.

“Those flames... Look out! It’s going to use its ‘Dragon Breath’!”

Fire spilled out of the dragon’s mouth, closing in on the commander as he rode away on his horse as fast as it could gallop.

“Miseyna, I might not get to meet your child after all...”

As hot air crackled around him, the commander’s wife and daughter flashed through his mind’s eye.

“Hi-yaaaaa! Inverted... ‘Death Guillotine’!”

Ryuona’s voice rang out, and the flames closing in on the commander’s back were scattered into the sky.

Her special attack had knocked the dragon’s chin upward while it was breathing fire.

“Hope you don’t mind if I buy you some time.”

“Allow me to aid you.”

“And I, that I shall.”

The Scarlet Nobleman Jelil, complete with his Ice Sword and red armor, stepped up to Ryuona’s side, as did Bauen, the Windblade, with his wind-imbued Magic Katana.

The dragon spread its wings and glared down at them menacingly, but then the flashily clad man it held in one hand shouted something, and the dragon took off into the air with an astounding jump and vanished on the wind beyond the hills.

The rebel army was already gone from the battlefield, which was dotted only with countless corpses.

“So, we escape with our lives...”

“Yes, thanks to Lady Ryuona and company.”

“Still...a dragon, cooperating with the rebel army? And it seemed to have some kind of trainer, too...”

It looked to the commander like the gaudily dressed man was some kind of tamer, who commanded the dragon to help the rebel army retreat before

having it fly away.

But could such a thing be possible? It seemed to go against all common sense.

“That judgment is far beyond my pay grade. I will report to the general and Duke Vistall and let them handle the rest.”

Giving up on contemplating a seemingly impossible scenario, the commander decided to focus on his own duty.

“Officers, take command of your troops! Gather any survivors. We’re regrouping with the main force!”

As he called out the order, the commander thanked his lucky stars that their lives had been spared.

Sacrificial Labyrinth

Satou here. Mad scientists used to show up all the time in old stories, but now I feel like you don't see them as often, which seems like a shame. Of course, I'd never want to meet one in real life, obviously.

"Security is strict, I declare."

"The labyrinth is a sort of military training area for Yowork Kingdom, I suppose."

Nana and Liza gazed at the multitude of walls and trenches in front of the labyrinth, all bustling with soldiers.

"Master, how are we going to get in?"

"By force?"

"I wouldn't do anything that violent."

I didn't really want to make that kind of move, even if it would admittedly be the easiest way in.

"I'll sneak in on my own and then come get all of you."

"Tama tooooo?"

"Ooh, it's Tama the Ninja's time to shine!"

If I was going to take anyone along, Tama made sense: She was the team's scout and had a lot of stealth-related skills that should prevent her from being detected.

Pochi wanted to come along, too. Luckily, Arisa talked her into staying behind by telling her that a samurai is supposed to stand in the back with their sword at the ready.

"All right, put this on and let's go."

"Nin-nin."

I handed a transparency cloak to Tama, who had changed into a pink ninja costume, and put one on myself. (The cloak, not the pink ninja costume.) “From here on out, we’ll use hand signals to communicate, okay?”

“Aye!”

We left the others behind and raced from shadow to shadow.

Eventually, we reached an area where there was no cover to hide us from the guards.

“Let’s activate the transparency cloaks. You lead the way now, Tama. I’ll be right behind you, don’t worry.”

“Aye.”

We both charged our transparency cloaks with magic power, and its optical camouflage kept us hidden as we crept between the guards without a sound. Since I was still able to see people who were otherwise invisible, I followed Tama easily.

I’d been worried about whether one of the guards might have “Magic Detection” or some such skill, but since the Magic Furnace in front of the labyrinth was in full operation, it would probably prevent the minor magic of the transparency cloaks from being detected.

Still, I found it strange that the Magic Cannons, Fire Rods, and other weapons positioned near the labyrinth entrance were pointed away from it.

They must be more concerned about attackers from the outside than monsters escaping from within.

...Whoops.

While I was distracted, Tama had reached the entrance and was waiting for my signal. I quickly slipped through to her side.

There was a large iron door set in front of the labyrinth entrance that seemed to be kept closed when not in use.

We waited for some soldiers to pass through, and I picked up Tama and used “Skyrunning” to pass above their heads and into the labyrinth.

The place smelled musty inside, more like the ruins underneath the old capital than the labyrinth of Celivera.

We avoided the torch-lit hallways and found an area with no one around before we took off our transparency cloaks.

“Good work. We made it inside.”

“Mission compleeete!”

Tama spun around happily.

Once her celebratory dance was done, I used “Search Entire Map” to get information about the labyrinth.

Hmm?

In my documents, this labyrinth was called the “Goblin Labyrinth”; on the map, however, its name was “Sacrificial Labyrinth.” Maybe the name changed when they sacrificed the royal family of Kuvork Kingdom to revive the labyrinth.

I skimmed the rest of the information.

While it didn’t reveal the location of the Dungeon Core or dungeonmaster, there were pathways and doors on the Middle and Lower strata that seemed to lead to separate maps. They must be hidden in one of those empty map areas, no doubt.

Ideally, the separate map in the Middle Stratum would be the hideout of the imperial mage Orchidee Matossh, the Geist user who was my original goal in coming here...

“Let’s goooo?”

“Right. We should bring everyone else in here.”

I put down a seal slate and used Return to get back to everyone else, then made a round trip back inside the labyrinth.

“Now, our destinations are on floors twenty and twenty-four of the Middle Stratum, and floor fifty of the Lower Stratum.”

“Floors? So this is one of those classic, big multi-level dungeons?”

I nodded at Arisa.

The labyrinths in Seiryuu City and Celivera weren't big multi-level dungeons, so "classic" didn't necessarily apply in this world. I guess you could say the ruins under the old capital were sort of like a multi-level dungeon?

"I believe the imperial mage Orchidee is hiding in one of those two areas in the Middle Stratum. Our main goal is to capture him and get him to free Arisa and Lulu from the Geist."

My backup plan was to get Orchidee put under a Geist and acquire the skill so I could do it myself, although I didn't mention this part, since I didn't want to worry everyone.

"Our other goal is to attack the dungeonmaster in the Lower Stratum and destroy the Dungeon Core to free the souls of Arisa's and Lulu's family members."

That should be a lot simpler, since it was just breaking things.

"Most of the enemies in this dungeon are bipedal: demi-goblins, demi-orcs, demi-ogres, and so on. They all have stronger variations like demi-goblin assassins, so don't let your guards down."

There were also creatures like slimes, rats, and even chimeras.

"There are Yowork Kingdom soldiers training against monsters in here, too. We'll avoid them as much as possible, but there are a few places on the route where we won't have a choice. Just remember that we'll have to stay hidden and sneak past them when that happens."

My companions all nodded, looking determined.

"Let's go, then. Pochi and I will take the lead. Nana and Lulu will protect Mia and Arisa in the middle, and Liza and Tama will bring up the rear."

Since the passages were narrow, I chose a modified double-file formation.

As soon as we started down the path, we immediately started running into demi-goblins.

GGWOOOOOZB.

"Too slow! Sir."

Pochi ducked under a left hook thrown by a demi-goblin grappler and slashed up its vulnerable torso.

GGWOOOOOZB.

GGWOOOOOZB.

This time, a demi-goblin swordsman and a demi-goblin thief leaped at her.

“Hi-yaaa, sir!”

Pochi’s kick sent the thief flying into the path of the swordsman’s attack, shielding her.

When her foot hit the ground, she launched herself forward and slashed both attackers in two with her “Spellblade”-infused Magic Sword.

“Mr. Demi-guys aren’t enough of a challenge, sir.”

“Pochi, pride cometh before a fall,” Liza warned.

“Yes, sir. Pochi is always wombat ready, sir.”

I think she meant to say “combat ready.”

“Next sounds flabbyyy?”

“Flabby? Must be orcs, then.”

“Mr. Hate pig snouts.”

“Yes, Mia. Demi-orc eyes are also very unpleasant, I declare.”

A group of demi-orcs came running from the darkness.

Unlike the fairy race of orcs that I met in the underground of the old and royal capitals, these demi-orcs looked exactly like the piglike race you might see in an old computer RPG.

“Quick attack! Grilled pork jutsu!”

Mia’s Flamethrower spell burned all the demi-orcs to a crisp.

Of course, there was no grilled pork jutsu. Arisa was probably being silly, as usual.

“Fireball jutsuuu?”

Tama used a flame-based ninja technique to toast a demi-goblin assassin that had crept up on us from behind. In her case, it was a ninjutsu using fire stone powder, not magic.

“There are a lot of goblins and orcs, aren’t there?”

“Yes, Lulu. Wherever there is one, thirty more are sure to follow, I declare.”

Lulu used her dual-wielded guns to shoot down demi-goblins and demi-orcs even as she spoke.

Nana followed up with a “Shield Bash” to take out any that escaped Lulu’s sniping.

“Satou.”

A small sylph floated next to Mia.

“Soldiers.”

She pointed at one of the hallways.

Apparently, she was using a sylph split into many smaller spirits to investigate the hallways, since the others had the fighting under control.

Unfortunately, the path with the soldiers was one we needed to use to get to the lower levels. Once the battle was over, I took everyone to get a closer look from a safe distance.

“There they are.”

In a large cavern, the Yowork soldiers were fighting some monsters, specifically a group of demi-orcs around level 15.

Shieldsmen in tattered armor were taking their blows head-on, while the soldiers in back with proper armor used their spears to attack the demi-orcs.

“Stay where you are, meat shield squad!”

One of the spearsmen shouted at a shieldsman who had flinched back under the demi-orcs’ powerful onslaught.

What a terrible name for a squad.

“I said stay put!”

When the shieldsman still fell back, the spearsman kicked him forward.

“Gya-ha-ha, that idiot just took a punch right to the skull.”

“Think he’s dead?”

“Nah, he looks alive. Those Kuvork scum are tough.”

“Quit yammering, idiots!”

The spearsmen were jeering at the shieldsmen’s plight.

Evidently, there was a strict hierarchy within the troops.

“Wait...”

Hearing Arisa whisper, I turned around.

“...That’s the Kuvork Kingdom crest.”

The shield-toting “meat shield squad” turned out to be slave soldiers from the fallen Kuvork Kingdom, while the spearsmen behind them were regular members of the Yowork army.

“That oughtta do it... Magic squad, finish them off!”

The mages finished their chants, and a volley of spells like Fire Ball and Toss Stone hit the demi-goblins.

The largest majority seemed to be Fire and Flame Magic users, followed by Earth Magic users. There were only a few Wind Magic and Water Magic users, and no users at all of Ice, Lightning, Light, or Dark.

“How cruel...”

The spells had engulfed the shieldsmen as well as the demi-orcs; the mages must need more practice. Fortunately, no one was killed, but many of them had burns or broken bones.

“Hey, did you guys do that on purpose?”

“Those mages are even meaner than us, heh.”

The spearsmen pointed and laughed at the shieldsmen as they rolled on the ground to put out the flames.

This was horrible treatment, even if they were slaves from a former enemy

kingdom.

“Master, a large bipedal monster I’ve never seen before is approaching, I report.”

“It doesn’t seem to be a little giant. It has horns and a hideous appearance, like a demi-goblin made much larger.”

I followed Nana’s and Liza’s gaze.

“That’s a demi-ogre.”

It was level 30 and loomed at over ten feet tall, with an enormous club in hand.

LUOOORGAAAA.

The demi-ogre’s hoarse roar echoed in the cavern.

“Captain! It’s an ogre, sir!”

“An ogre all the way up here?”

“But why? They live at least another five floors down.”

“Maybe the sounds of our spells attracted it?”

“Calm down! We’ll retreat starting with the first squad. Scouts, throw smoke bombs! Shieldsmen, take the rear! If the ogre catches up to us, fight it to buy time. That’s an <Order>!”

The Yowork Kingdom soldiers began to flee, leaving the wounded slave soldiers to die defending them.

“Master, please. We have to save those people.”

Lulu looked at me with tears in her eyes.

Arisa, who was hanging her head, looked up at the sound of Lulu’s voice. Her face was deathly pale.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

I patted Lulu and Arisa and gave them a reassuring nod.



“Master, what are we going to do?”

Arisa looked panicked, probably because the shieldsmen were moments from getting attacked if we didn’t intervene.

While most of the Yowork soldiers had escaped from the smoke-filled cavern, there were still enough of them left to see us if we showed ourselves.

“Simple. We’ll do this.”

LUOOORGAAAA.

I used my “Ventriloquism” skill to imitate the roar of the demi-ogre, and produced the image of a group of ogres with the Light Magic spell Illusion.

Luckily, the Illusion spell startled the demi-ogre into stopping in its tracks, looking this way in confusion.

“Pochi will help, too, sir.”

“Tama toooo?”

I handed some oversize hammers to Tama and Pochi to create vibrations in time with the fake footsteps. Who would have thought some weapons I made just for kicks would come in handy like this?

“More ogres! At least a dozen of them!”

“Run for itttt! They’ll eat us alive!”

As soon as they saw the illusion, the Yowork soldiers abandoned their orderly retreat and started stampeding away.

“Shieldsmen! Defend this place down to the last man, dammit!”

Bellowing another heartless order, the commander vanished down the hallway.

I produced a few large boulders from Storage and used my always-activated Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to throw them down the hall, blocking the passage where the soldiers had fled. Now they were successfully separated.

“Dammit! The ogres threw rocks to block our escape!”

“Not like we could’ve run away, thanks to that damned captain’s orders

anyway.”

“Yeah...if I’ve gotta die, I wish I coulda died fighting for my family and kingdom instead of getting eaten by ogres, ya know?”

The slave soldiers from the former Kuvork Kingdom seemed resigned to their fate.

I decided to draw the demi-ogre’s attention before they started a suicide attack.

LUOOOORGAAAAA.

I used my “Ventriloquism” again to imitate the demi-ogre, this time adding the “Taunt” skill to the mix.

“Arisa, use Fire Magic to make a show of defeating the demi-ogre, please.”

“I’m on it! ...‘Flame Pillar’!”

A column of fire shot up under the demi-ogre’s feet.

It started to flee, so I used my new Iron Toss spell to make an instant cage around it.

“One of the ogres is using magic!”

“Friendly fire?”

“Let’s run while we—gaaaah!”

One of the slave soldiers tried to tell the others to flee, only to fall to the ground.

The enslavement collar around his neck must have tightened because he tried to disobey an order.

Shoot.

“I’m going to knock them out. Evacuate them without the soldiers back there noticing, okay?”

I put an ogre-like Illusion spell over myself and charged right into the middle of the slave soldiers with “Warp.”

“A smaller ogre!”

“Dammit, it’s too fast!”

I knocked out the slaves one after another with my “Abduction” skill.

Tama and Pochi, making a zipped-lips gesture, put unconscious slaves onto stretchers and carried them out. Nana and Pochi carried one under each arm, and even the delicate Lulu carried one out on her back.

Once they were out of harm’s way, Arisa performed triage, identifying the most severely wounded for Mia to use her Healing Magic on.

They should be able to take care of the wounded from here.

One of the soldiers tried to peer in from beyond the blocked passage, so I hit the ceiling of the passage with the Fire Magic spell Chain Fire Shot. On the other side, soldiers yelled and commanders gave orders in alarm.

The spell sealed off the top of the boulder, which should prevent any unwanted intrusions for a while.

I took over making fake battle sounds for the busy Tama and Pochi and used my “Ventriloquism” skill to try to act out the slave soldiers’ hopeless battle and ultimate demise against the demi-ogres.

“Don’t eat meee! Please don’t eat—gaaaAAAAH!”

LUOOOORGAAAA.

“That was my best friend, damn you! DIIIIIIIE!”

LUOOOORGAAAA.

“GAAAAAAAHH!”

My companions stared at me, their eyes wide. Maybe I overdid it with the acting a little bit.

...It made it a little embarrassing to act with them watching, though.

We changed the slave soldiers into clean clothes, ripped up their bloodied armor and clothing with the dead demi-goblin’s tusks and claws, and scattered them around the room. Since there were tons of orc corpses in the room, I destroyed them with Wind Magic and sent bones and flesh flying everywhere.

That should be good enough to fake the soldiers’ deaths.

Thanks to the help of my “Forgery” and “Counterfeit” skills, it should be believable even if the Yowork soldiers bothered to investigate with the “Analyze” skill.



“...Who are you?”

“I’m Kuro, a retainer of Nanashi the Hero. His Highness Sir Eruus sent me to save you.”

Disguised as Kuro, I addressed the slave soldiers face-to-face when they awoke.

“A hero’s retainer!”

“Wh-where are we?”

The soldiers looked around.

We were in the City Core room in the great desert.

I’d used Unit Deployment to bring them here. Arisa had protested, worrying like always, but I managed to convince her by borrowing the soul shell garland artifact she wore to prevent her soul vessel from being damaged.

“A place where we can undo your slave contract.”

“R-really?! You’re gonna free us from slavery?!”

“That’s right. I’ll make you all honorary hereditary knights, then strip the title away.”

My explanation didn’t seem to be sufficient because the men and women just exchanged confused looks.

“Wh-what will that do, exactly?” one of them ventured.

“When you first receive a noble title, you’re automatically freed from a slave contract. With this method, we don’t need permission from your master in the Yowork army.”

They all happily agreed to this, so I gave each of them the title, broke their slave contracts, and took the title away, repeating the process for each one.

> Title Acquired: Liberator

> Title Acquired: Hatchet Man

For some reason, I earned a few titles in the process. The latter was probably for “firing” them from the honorary rank.

Once they were freed from slavery, I grabbed them with Magic Hand and moved them to a location near Kageus City with Unit Deployment.

“Sir Eruus is in that city. You’re on your own from here.”

With that, I gave them enough money to enter the city and a letter to explain things to Eruus.

Since they might look suspicious showing up in only civilian clothes, I used Bonecraft to whip up some armor and weapons and gave them some bags with preserved foods from my excessive stock. I made sure the equipment was no better than that of an average soldier’s, so hopefully it would be fine.



“I’m back. I brought them to the city and sent them Eruus’s way.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“Master, thank you so much.”

Arisa and Lulu came running over with worried expressions when I returned, so I told them what had happened with the slave soldiers.

“Master, we faked the ogres’ retreat, I report.”

“Thanks. It looks great.”

“Mm. Perfect.”

Mia puffed up her chest proudly.

I’d asked the rest of the group to make it look like the ogres left, and they did even better than I expected. The footprints and battle damage looked incredibly realistic.

“Mia used her spirits to bring up some real ogres from the lower floors.”

Oh, so they brought in the real thing... No wonder it looked so convincing.

“Master, shall I retrieve the iron spikes impaling the ogre corpse? I inquire.”

Nana was probably referring to the cone-shaped iron spears that my Toss Iron spell produced from the floor.

“My magic mostly melted them... Wait, it’s just coating?”

On closer inspection, the iron was only plating, with a stone interior.

I guess the Toss Iron spell collects iron sand from the ground and creates stalagmites coated with iron to increase their piercing power.

Although we probably wouldn’t get much metal, it was rare for Nana to offer a suggestion like this. I used my refining spells Melt Metal and Extract Metal to collect the iron.

As she watched this process, Pochi’s stomach growled.

“Well, we can’t exactly eat lunch here. Let’s head a little farther down and take a break.”

I popped pieces of jerky into Pochi’s and Tama’s mouths as I spoke.

Then I returned the soul shell garland to Arisa, and we went five floors down and had some lunch. I made the meal a little meat-heavy since the beastfolk girls seemed disappointed that there wasn’t any prey to get meat from in this dungeon.

Once we’d raised our spirits with a meal, we headed deeper into the labyrinth and dealt with an increasing amount of demi-ogres, aiming for the empty map areas of the Middle Stratum.

“Master, that demi-ogre has a gun for an arm, I report.”

“There are demi-orcs with extra eyes and demi-goblins with multiple heads not far from here, too.”

When we reached the first of our Middle Stratum destinations, Nana and Liza spotted some strange monsters.

“Chimeras.”

“Maybe Orchidee modified them?”

“I almost feel bad for the poor creatures.”

Evidently, they were breeding and mutating monsters to increase Yowork Kingdom's military might.

I thought a chimera might have its creator's name in the AR display, but I couldn't find any such thing in the information column.

"Found a gaaate?"

Tama returned from scouting the blank area.

We followed her to the gate.

"Rusty."

"It has not been well cared for, I complain."

Just as Mia and Nana said, the gate that separated the blank area from the rest of the labyrinth was made of rusty iron.

"No traaaps?"

Both Tama and my "Trap Detection" skill found it free of any traces of traps.

"Want to try picking the lock, Tama?"

"Aye."

Tama fiddled with her tool kit until the lock opened with a clink.

"Got iiit."

"Nicely done, Tama."

"Nyeh-heh-heh."

I praised Tama's successful lockpicking effort.

Just to be safe, I changed into my Kuro disguise to keep my identity secret and had the rest of the group put on full-face gold armor.

The other map seemed to start from the corridor on the other side of the gate. I used the Search Entire Map spell and found one mage, dozens of sleeping chimeras, and ten golems and living dolls that served the mage.

"How's it look, Master?"

"There's a mage, but not the Geist user we're looking for."

The bigger problem was the chimeras—specifically, the test subjects used to make them.

“Emergencyyyy?”

“Hi-ya, sir!”

“Master, enemy attack, I report.”

I closed the menu screen in my AR display.

Up ahead, the vanguard team stood over the remains of a battle golem with a sword and shield for hands.

“Master! Come quickly, please!”

Liza called me from farther down the hall.

“What...in the world...?”

“Mrr...”

The room was lined with over a dozen cylindrical tubes like the one used for modifying homunculi like Nana; each of them contained a chimera in progress, suspended in orange liquid.

“They’re combining humans and monsters...”

Lulu trailed off in shock.

“Don’t look at that,” I murmured, pulling her close.

Liza covered Pochi’s and Tama’s eyes, while Nana covered Mia’s, turning away.

“They used Kuvork Kingdom knights as test subjects.”

Tears streamed down Arisa’s face as she bit her lip.

“Wh-who the hell are you people? Gaaaaah!”

A robed mage emerged from the back of the room.

My AR display showed his name as “Bedgar,” a different imperial mage from the one we were seeking.

“You’re here to steal muh-muh-my research, aren’t yooooou?!”

“Feel my fury! ‘First Blaaaast’!”

While Bedgar spoke in a strange manner, Arisa struck him with a chantless Space Magic spell.

“Bgyaaaaah!”

His face crumpling, he tumbled back with blood spewing from his nose.

She must have used her new nonlethal knockout spell that focused air into a compressed blast.

Even at the height of anger, Arisa could still control herself enough to not kill anyone.

I assume that shouting a silly attack name even in an emotionally charged moment like this was her way of letting off steam.

“Gaaaah! You punched muh-muh-meeeeeee!”

“I don’t care if not even your father hit you! ‘Punishing Second Buuuurst’!”

As Bedgar clutched his nose and fell back, Arisa piled on more chantless attacks.

“And the finishing blow, ‘Third Impac’—!”

“Arisa, that’s enough.”

I stopped Arisa’s magic before she could accidentally kill him.

“P-pleef donf kill me!”

Evidently broken by the storm of shock wave attacks, Bedgar begged for his life as blood ran from his broken nose and drooping face.

“We won’t be able to understand him like this...”

I used Healing Magic only on the area of his mouth, sprinkling some bitter liquid from an old failed experiment over him as a distraction.

“Can you talk?”

“DUH-DIIIIIIIE!”

Without answering my question, Bedgar pulled out a hidden wand from his sleeve and aimed it at Arisa. It seemed to be a small, pistol-like Fire Rod.

But before it could shoot fire, the rod was blown to bits, along with the hand that held it. Lulu had beaten him to the draw.

“GAAAAAAH! Muh-muh-my haaaaaand!”

“If you resist, your life is forfeit.”

I hit Bedgar hard with my “Intimidation” skill, just barely restraining it enough to keep him from fainting.

“Eeeeeek! Sp-spare meeeeeee!”

The man trembled, turning even paler.

“Answer my questions, then.”

“Gaaah... I-if I answer yuh-your questions, yuh-you’ll spare meeee?”

“If you answer honestly, I swear my friends and I won’t kill you.”

“A-all riiiiight. Puh-puh-pleez, ask me whatever yuh-you waaaant!”

Several kinds of fluids dripped from Bedgar’s face as he nodded rapidly.

“First question. Can you turn these chimeras back into humans?”

“Gaaaah, of course nottt. Just like you can’t turn berry jam buh-back into berries...”

Bedgar answered through tearful cackles.

“Even with an elixir?”

“That might work on some average chimeraaa, but not on muh-muh-my perfect chimeraaa! They’re made with fusion devices produced with elf technologyyyy.”

Elf technology...?

I checked the glass cylinders and found that the creator’s name was “Touya.”

That wasn’t a proper elf name. If anything, it was most likely a reincarnation that made the equipment.

I wrote the name in my list of notable persons so I wouldn’t forget.

“So you’re saying there’s no way to turn them back?”

“Not by muh-muh-meeee. The fuh-freaks in the ‘Sage’s Tower’ or the taboo arts of the Weaselman Empire might be able to do it, thooough...”

He might just be blowing hot air, but I wrote down the information anyway, since Arisa had gone to the trouble of getting it out of him.

“Next question. Why did you make them into chimeras?”

“O-only under His Majesty the King’s orders, sirrrrr. I was instructed to use duh-dragon components to make an unbeatable army of powerful dragonkin, to rebuild the Great Eldohk Kingdom, gaaaaah!”

So this was the king’s doing...

“What kind of dragon components?”

“We got a little bit of duh-dragon bloood, so I used it for fusions with demi-dragons like hydra and naga. Muh-my techniques are the greatest in all the laaaand!”

So they used dragon blood and demi-dragon parts.

That explained why the chimera test subjects had reptilian features.

“...So how were you planning on controlling these powerful dragonkin, anyway?”

This time, Arisa asked a question. Bedgar’s face twisted madly.

“The needles, heh-heh. We control them with the ‘Doom Needles’ I stuck in their buh-braaains. No one can withstand pain directly in the brain, not even spiiiies who have trained to resist torture, or those damned noble-minded kniiights, gaaah!”

That sounded more like science fiction than fantasy. Maybe this technology came from the same reincarnation who might’ve provided the chimera fusion device.

I searched my map and found that there were “Doom Needles” in the chimera victims’ brains and in a vault in the lab. Luckily, I was able to put them directly into Storage with Magic Hand.

“And if you still couldn’t control them?”

“We’d use the black magic bombs I put in their hearts to blow them to smithereeeens!”

Bedgar cackled triumphantly.

“Don’t you dare laugh...! ‘Final Rainbow of Raaaage’!”

Arisa used another Space Magic attack to send him flying.

The shock wave hit his chin like an uppercut, knocking him through the air in a perfect arc, like a rainbow. It was as perfectly executed as a finishing blow from a boxing manga.

“Don’t worry, Arisa. I already took the needles and bombs out of them.”

“Thanks, Master.”

I hugged Arisa close and whispered in her ear.

Then I used my Magic Hand to catch Bedgar in his clumsy attempt at an escape and dragged him back.

“Next question. Where is the imperial mage Orchidee Matossh?”

“O-Orchideeee? That wily senior bastard’s been around longer than muh-meee. He’s in the research lab four floors down, gaaah.”

Evidently, our target was to be found in the blank area on the twenty-fourth floor.

“One last question. What is Orchidee up to down there?”

“What is that traitor doing, yuh-you aaask?”

Bedgar glared at nothing, his face warped with anger at the mere thought of Orchidee.

“He said he was tired of the valuable research H-His Majesty assigned him, making chimera soldiers. So he shoved it off on muh-meeee, and went off to do research of his ooown...!”

“And what is he researching?”

“That fuh-foooool? He said something about finding a w-way to use his blasted ability without limits...but I don’t know the details, gaaah.”

So he was researching a way to cast Geists without any limitations...

If he succeeded, that would be a bit of a problem.

"I—I answered all your questions, gaaah! So you'll let muh-muh-me live like you promised, yesss?"

"First, set the people you turned into chimeras free."

"Whaaaaah? Set them fuh-freeeeee?"

"Oh, you'd rather not?"

Arisa cowed Bedgar with a wave of threatening blasts.

"Gaaaah! I-I'll free themmmm!"

Bedgar pressed a few buttons on the console, and the liquid drained from the cylinders, which opened from the top.

"That was a little too easy."

Arisa eyed the man suspiciously.

"So it wasn't just a bad dream..."

"Is he going to make us kill our compatriots from Kuvork Kingdom again?"

"He might even force us to fight each other this time."

The knights who had been made into chimeras awoke at the bottoms of their tubes, muttering with bitterness and despair.

Their speech was garbled with guttural sounds that made it hard to understand, so I adjusted it in my mind.

"Y-y-you foools! Your enemy this time is those kiiiids! Kill them all, gah-ha-haaaaa!"

Bedgar pointed at us as he shrieked.

"Now he wants us to kill children...?"

"Maybe we should just take him down with us..."

The chimera knights turned on Bedgar, who quickly produced a device with buttons and levers from his pocket and held it up. *"C-can't you see this,*

foooools?!"

"...Dammit. The needles..."

"If we kill him, the bombs in our hearts will take out those poor kids, too."

"Please, run! We don't want to kill you! Get out of here!"

One of the chimera knights gestured for us to run with a steely expression.

Clearly, they intended to wait for us to escape and then attack Bedgar, even if it meant they would all be killed.

Bedgar, who had been slowly backing away, dove into a separate room.

"Yuh-yuh-you fooools! Have you fuh-forgotten that there's a fortress-level magic barrier heeeere?!"

As he spoke, a barrier sealed the exit.

"Dammit, that bastard!"

"He's always been quick to get out of dodge."

The chimera knights grimaced.

"Now, huh-hurryyyyy up and kill themmmm!"

"Run for it, dammit! We can't defy his needles!"

"Not to worry!" Arisa addressed the anguished knights. "We've already removed all the needles and bombs that were tormenting you!"

"R-really?"

"What a s-stupid bluuuuff! Feel the judgment of the Doom Needles, gaaaaah-ha-ha!"

Bedgar pressed the button.

The chimera knights all braced themselves for an onslaught of agony. Of course, since I had already removed the needles, it never came.

"Yessssssss!"

"We're freeeeee!"

Once they realized this, the chimera knights all shouted with joy.

“That’s right, you’re free. Free to do whatever you like... Let’s go, everyone.”

Arisa headed for the lab’s exit.

Behind us, the chimera knights destroyed the tubes and devices with their sharp claws and tails and began banging on the barrier that protected Bedgar.

Arisa turned back for just a moment; I followed her gaze and saw a large crack forming in the magic barrier.

She must have used her Space Magic to help give their revenge a little nudge.

Behind us, I heard the sound of the barrier breaking and the beginnings of Bedgar’s screams, so I cast the soundproofing Wind Magic spell on the door to the lab so that we wouldn’t hear anything that might cause nightmares.

“Master, are we really leaving those people there?”

“I’m sure it’ll take some time for them to calm down. We’ll take care of business first, then come back to get them later.”

I answered Liza’s concerned question on Arisa’s behalf.

My map search would make it easy to find them. Besides, based on the information in my AR display, the “chimera-fied” knights could handle even a demi-ogre without a problem.



“He’s not here...?”

Four floors later, we reached the research lab in the other blank space, only to discover that the mage we were pursuing was nowhere to be found.

There were chimera devices, like in the other lab, but this one only contained empty tubes, without a single soul in sight.

“Satou!”

“Master, we found a clue, I report!”

Mia and Nana called out from the other room.

“Mew!”

“They got the right room, sir!”

Tama and Pochi, who were helping me search the main lab, seemed envious.

We met up with Arisa and Lulu and went deeper inside.

“Research notes.”

“This is a journal, I insist.”

“Both.”

Mia and Nana gave me some files tied up in string.

I flipped through the pages, skimming their contents.

“Looks like there are research notes in between the journal entries. Orchidee’s signature is on the very last page.”

“What does it say?”

I picked out a passage about his research in this lab and read it for Arisa.

“The dragon’s blood that the yellow-robed mage gave me is truly a marvelous material. Just by using the magic devices that the hermit left behind, my chimeras have come far closer to completion. With the help of Lord Yellow Robes’s teachings, this time I swear I shall achieve my goal.”

Not the yellow-robed mage again... This person seemed to be up to no good all over the place, since someone by the same description was providing the plunderers in the Celivera Labyrinth with technology. I was starting to worry that there might be some kind of elder root in this place, too, like the one I made with the reincarnations in the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum.

“Very annoyed. The knights who deliver my supplies interrupted my work with pointless drivel yet again. As if I have any time to spare for more research on something as trivial as dragonkin...”

From the sound of things, Orchidee didn’t get along very well with the Yowork Kingdom people.

“My colleague was demoted and sent here. Though he has a few screws loose, he more than makes up for it with passion and skill in our field of research. I managed to pique his interest and get him to take over that stupid dragonkin research for me. I will continue with my own research in the new lab I made four

floors down.”

So all of this so far was about the lab on the twentieth floor?

“It seems changing the test subjects to mages was the correct choice. Men are better suited than women, and young better than old.”

It also said that he’d claimed more than twenty victims in the process of his research thus far, though I didn’t read that part aloud.

“I’ve successfully used a mage subject to create a chimera.”

His notes said that he’d fused the dragon’s blood with a monster core in the subject’s heart.

At least ten more people had been killed in the process, too. What an inhumane approach.

“With these subjects, I can use my Geist anytime I wish.”

Wait...for real?

“I no longer have any reason to serve King Yowork. With the power that unsavory woman copied for me, I need not fear even gods nor the devil. This time, I shall acquire the ultimate power at last.”

That was the end of the file.

Power from an “unsavory woman,” huh...?

The woman called Myude, who was manipulating King Yowork with Psychic Magic, flitted across my mind.

If they combined forces with his Geist and her Psychic Magic, they could definitely cause some serious trouble.

I closed the file.

“Is that it? It didn’t say anything about where he went?”

“No, I reread the whole thing and didn’t find anything to hint at his whereabouts.”

A mage who can use Geist without limitations would be way too dangerous.

I had to shut him down as soon as possible.

“Do you mind if I take that? I’ll check for some kind of coded message.”

I handed the file to Arisa, and we headed toward our last destination: the bottom of the labyrinth.



“So the dungeonmaster is past this point?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

I nodded at Lulu.

We’d conquered the labyrinth with ease and made it to the Lower Stratum before sundown.

This was the last empty space on the map. If the dungeonmaster was anywhere, this would be the place.

“We made it here awfully easily, though.”

“It was not much of a challenge, I complain.”

“Mm.”

Nana and Mia agreed with Arisa.

We’d mostly fought different kinds of demi-ogres on the way here, along with other humanoid monsters, like the regenerating labyrinth demi-troll and the giant dungeon cyclops.

“No meeeeat?”

“Mr. Goat wasn’t edible, either, sir.”

We also ran into a maze minotaur, which looked like the world’s biggest and ugliest faun. Since I was reluctant to eat anything that walked on two legs, we took the core and scrapped the rest.

“We can just hunt for meat outside of the labyrinth, remember.”

Liza’s comment seemed to reassure the pair.

Since Yowork Kingdom and the former Kuvork Kingdom were surrounded by monster territory on all sides, there were plenty of hunting grounds to choose from. The only safe zones were the narrow borders between nations, where the

highways and checkpoints were built.

“Nin-nin.”

Our resident ninja Tama investigated the gate on the bottom floor.

“There’s a traaap?”

“Can you tell what kind?”

“Meeew...magiic?”

Tama couldn’t tell what kind of magic the trap contained.

“Some sort of draining spell, maybe? Can either of you tell?”

“I can see through it with Practical Magic, but I can’t tell what the contraption does.”

“Mr. Spirit Eater.”

Arisa, Lulu, and Mia all offered their best guesses.

“So what’s the correct answer?” Arisa asked, peering up at me.

“Looks like it’s a forced teleporter. The draining device takes your magic and uses it to activate the teleporter. The spirit-eating is an ability of the monster that makes up the draining device, too.”

The “monster” was a simple creature embedded in the device, more like an amoeba.

“Well, I’d hate to accidentally get teleported inside a rock or something. Shall we take a shortcut?”

Arisa pointed at the wall next to the door.

She was probably suggesting that we make a hole in the wall to create a safe path.

I used “Skylarking” to stand on the wall and aimed the Pitfall spell at it beneath my feet.

“Whew, that’s tough...”

There was so much resistance that it took five times more magic than usual to force it through.

Finally, I felt the Pitfall reach the other side.

“Looks like it worked. Wait here for a minute while I investigate.”

It was very possible that the dungeonmaster was one of the Yowork Kingdom people who revived the labyrinth, and the missing Orchidee might be hiding in there, too. I doubted Orchidee himself would turn out to be the dungeonmaster, but I transformed into my Nanashi the Hero disguise, just in case.

“Be careful! Don’t do anything reckless.”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

I entered the hole I’d made in the wall, leaving a worried Arisa and the others behind.

The end of the hole seemed to be the boundary of the separate map.

“I guess I should be grateful for the big welcome party?”

I blocked the oncoming bullets with Flexible Shield, and alit from the tunnel on the other side of the wall.

There were a dozen or so mages with matching yellow staves lying in wait beyond the wall, along with some gun-arm golems. I probably had my forceful entrance to thank for that.

The mages were wearing jet-black robes with long sleeves, the hoods hanging low to cover their faces.

“<Let the twilight dawn.>”

The mages spoke in unison, and yellow light glowed at the ends of their staves.

Were they casting some kind of buff?

“Intruder!”

At their center stood one mage with a fancier staff and robe.

“Obey me!”

The mages chorused again.

While their harmony was great and all, they didn't seem like much for conversation.

The mage with the extravagant staff wasn't the dungeonmaster, but he was the reason I came here in the first place: Orchidee.

“■ **Activate** *Kidou*.”

An enormous magic circle appeared before them.

Uh-oh.

“■ **Synchronize** *Douchou*.”

I hesitated for just a moment over whether to use the Practical Magic spell Break Magic on the magic circle or to knock out Orchidee at its center, then decided on the latter.

If I could just incapacitate their leader, the Support Magic circle for activating his Geist should be meaningless.

“■ **Invoke** *Hatsudou*.”

The glow of the magic circle grew more intense, lighting me up from below as I sent Orchidee flying with a palm strike.

As the unconscious man thudded against the wall, his hood slipped off, and I saw a yellow crown fly off his bald head.

“■”

Orchidee's information appeared in my AR display.

Level 30. Occupation: None... Did he get fired for neglecting his official duties?

“■”

Race: Homunculus.

Creator: ...Orchidee Matossh?!

“■”

Oh, this is bad.

They all had the same staff, the same clothes, similar frames—which was the real one?

I scanned their names in my AR display.

Every one of them was named “Orchidee Matossh.”

“Ge...”

Whatever, I’ll just take them all out!

No, that wouldn’t work. My only spell for knocking people out without killing them took a few precious milliseconds to invoke, and Smell Field was too hard to control with precision.

That’s it! The skill! If I find the one with the “Geist” skill— I searched the room.

There!

“...ist.”

I used “Warp” to land in front of the man just as the “Geist” skill was activated.

I heard the last of the invocation leave his mouth with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

> Unable to resist “Geist.” “ ” has been put under control.

> Skill Acquired: “Geist”

> Skill Acquired: “Geist Resistance”

As I sent my fist flying toward his solar plexus, I saw the log in the corner of my vision.

At the same time, a pattern like a red spiderweb spread over my AR display, and my thoughts went muddy.

“Kneel, my servant.”

The bastard in black—no, the man in the jet-black robes—no, my almighty master.

“Yes, my lord.”

I obeyed my master’s command and sank to one knee.

All sorts of information appeared in my AR display next to him.

The red spiderweb in the corners of my vision was distracting, but it didn't make the text unreadable by any means.

He had six titles: "Ruler," "Dungeonmaster," "Chimera Meister," "Yowork Kingdom Imperial Mage," "Traitor," and "Kuvork Kingdom Imperial Mage." His skills included "Geist," "Contract," "Name Order," "Chant Interruption Resistance," "Dark Magic," "Ghost Magic," and "Analyze," among others.

My master's staff was called a "Fake Xanthic Staff," an artifact that allowed the wielder to use a previously charged active skill three times with only an invocation word.

The last one he had charged was "Never Give Up"—one of Arisa's unique skills, oddly enough. Its effect meant that the user's spell or attack would bypass all of the target's resistance with a certain percentage of success, no matter how much more powerful they might be.

So strong is my master's destiny to succeed that it bends luck in his favor.

"Your orders, if you please."

I eagerly awaited my all-powerful lord's command.

Requiem

Satou here. I once had a close friend die unexpectedly, and I found myself wishing I could see them again, even if it was just as a ghost. Of course, that was an impossible wish that never came true, but maybe in a parallel world...

"I cannot read your name. A recognition-inhibiting tool, eh? How irritating... Tell me your name. That is an order."

My great master Lord Orchidee gave me my first order.

Though I did not know what features were hidden beneath the black hood, I knew someone so great as my master must have an equally handsome face.

Right now, obeying his order was much more important than worrying about the strange red spiderweb-like afterimages at the corners of my vision.

Before I spoke my name, I cast off the disguise I wore, including the recognition-inhibiting device that had troubled my lord.

"My name is Na..."

Halfway through, I remembered that this was a fake name and trailed off.

I had to change my name back to Satou in my social tab.

But for some reason, it was locked. Why couldn't I change it?

"Hmph, so you are level 89, nearly on par with the great master. Impressive that you are still fighting against the Geist even when it contained that cursed witch's power..."

I must have given my master the wrong idea because of my hesitation.

What an idiot—wait, no, I mean a wise and vigilant man.

Pushing away the disrespectful thought that arose in the back of my mind, I opened my mouth to correct the misunderstanding, only to realize that he was

unfortunately still talking.

Rather than rudely interrupting him, I waited for him to finish talking.

"I order you yet again! Submit yourself to me, and tell me your name at once!

■■■ *Geist!"*

He struck a melodramatic—I mean, *majestic* pose as he activated his skill.

My log showed that I had resisted it, but I decided to keep that to myself for the sake of my master's honor.

At any rate, it should be all right for me to state my name now.

"My name is Sa—"

"Master!!"

The voices of Arisa and the other girls drowned out my introduction.

For some reason, the spiderweb-like patterns in the corners of my vision grew stronger.

"Your subordinates?"

"Yes, my lord."

Answering his question was more important than finishing my introduction.

"It seems they have recognition-inhibiting tools, too. But I assume since they made it this far, they, too, are stronger than they appear?"

"You have a keen eye, my lord."

"Oh-ho?"

"Just as you surmised, they are so skillful that they defeated a floormaster in the Celivera Labyrinth on their own."

I boasted of my companions to my great lord.

"Satou...?"

"Wh-what's going on, Master?"

"Arisa, I think something's wrong with him."

"Perhaps that man did something to him, I propose."

For some reason, the girls looked concerned.

As much as I wanted to go to their side, I was still conversing with my all-powerful master. I'd better wrap it up quick—no, I had best explain it to them only after my master is done speaking.

“Given their appearance, they should be able to infiltrate enemy lands without being noticed. No doubt they can cause all manner of destruction before they are killed by enemy soldiers.”

Killed by enemy soldiers? Did he want to use my kids as disposable pawns?

I used my stupidly high MND stat to force down the insolent thoughts that arose in my mind, and kept anything that might displease my master out of my expression with my “Poker Face” skill.

The red spiderwebs at the corners of my vision kept spreading farther and darker, much to my annoyance.

“Are they stronger than you?”

While I tried to shake off the unpleasant afterimages, my master's wonderful voice reached my ears.

I dropped my unnecessary distraction at once and responded.

“No.”

“Can you take them captive by yourself?”

“I can.”

I should be able to use Unit Deployment to capture them without harming them.

“Seize them, then. The more sacrificial pawns we have, the better.”

Sacrificial pawns...?

The spiderwebs crept farther across my vision, dense and dark red.

“Yes, my lord.”

Carrying out my great master's orders was more important than dealing with the annoying distraction.

I turned toward Arisa and the others.

“I am under my great lord’s orders.”

“W-wait a minute, Master! Come on, wake up!”

“Arisa, do you think Master got put under a Geist, too?”

“Yes, Lulu. That is a strong possibility, I report.”

“Uh-oooh?”

“Th-this is bad, sir!”

“It’s awful! If Satou has fallen into enemy hands, we’re in big, big trouble. What do we do? This is worse than a whole team of demon lords getting revived, you know. The entire world could be in danger. It’s true, you know?”

My companions were panicking. Mia even started talking in full sentences.

“This is the most hopeless situation we have encountered yet, I declare.”

Nana seemed to have misunderstood somehow.

“We’ve got to bring Master back to his senses somehow.”

I never thought the day would come that Arisa, of all people, would question my sanity.

“But howww?”

“If we give him a good smack on the head, I’m sure that’ll fix it.”

What am I, some old grandmother’s tube TV?

“I—I don’t want to hit Master...”

“It’s only to get him back to normal.”

“P-Pochi will try, sir.”

“I shall use everything Master has taught me to ensure that my spear reaches him.”

Please don’t. That sounds painful.

“Satou...”

From what little I could see through the increasingly dense red spiderweb

patterns blocking my vision, Mia and the others looked like they were on the verge of tears.

“Ready, everyone?”

“Ready.”

The others all responded to Arisa as one, and shifted into battle posture to face me.

“Put those foolish little girls back in their place. Even if they lose two or three limbs in the process, I’ll just bring them back as chimeras. Show them no mercy! T’would be no small entertainment to give such beautiful faces the body parts of terrible monsters.”

That bastard—I mean, my great lord—is pissing me off so much—I mean, his plan is clearly too wise for the likes of me to tolerate—I mean, understand.

Liza charged at me with a grim look on her face.

By her side, Nana was expressionless, but I knew her well enough from all our time spent together to sense her sadness clearly. Pochi and Tama followed, also in distress.

Although I could barely see through the red webbing encroaching on my vision, I have plenty of skills at my disposal.

Not being able to see wouldn’t prevent me from fighting.

I used “Warp” to leap in front of Nana.

“...Fortress!”

Layers of protective barriers appeared in front of Nana. I used a Holy Sword from Storage to destroy them.

Despite Fortress’s toughness, the “Shining Helix Slash” I learned from Hayato the Hero himself was able to destroy it. I’d better finish making a “Castle” and “Mobile Fortress” for the gold armor instead of settling for this magic device.

Of course, I was careful to use the dull side of my blade so the shock waves wouldn’t hurt Nana or the other girls.

““Triple Helix Spear Attack’!”

I countered Liza's speedy special attack with a "Triple Helix" of my own, twining mine around her weapon and turning it aside.

"'Vanquish Strike', sir!"

Pochi popped out from behind Liza, using her own special attack.

Blocking it with my sword seemed dangerous, so I used "Warp" to dodge to one side, giving Pochi a light push and sending her tumbling into Liza.

"'Vorpel Faaang'?"

Tama crept up in my blind spot and unleashed an attack. Blind spots don't matter if you're not depending on your vision in the first place, though.

I waited for the instant that her dual blades crossed and struck them with my Holy Sword, knocking her off-balance long enough to grab the waist of her armor and toss her at Nana.

"Target...locked!"

The kindhearted Lulu fired at my sword. I used "Spellblade" on the tip to knock the shot away.

"'Deracinator'!"

The blocked bullet came back at me from an unexpected direction. I was still able to catch it by putting "Magic Power Armor" around my palm, though.

Arisa must have ricocheted it at me with her Space Magic.

"H-he caught the bullet...?"

"Bullets don't work on me, you know."

"...You're so darn OP!"

Hmm. I think they could probably do it, too, with enough practice, no?

"Let's try another team attack."

"Right!"

Back on their feet, the four vanguard fighters came at me again.

I must've held back a bit too much. If they kept trying over and over, it would only increase the risk of one of them getting hurt.

I used “Warp” and “Flashrunning” to throw them off, teleporting into each one’s blind spot with a visual Unit Deployment and knocking them out with a quick palm strike, one after another.

“H-he’s too strong...”

Arisa’s voice shook with despair.

...My chest hurt. I’d better finish this quickly.

I used “Warp” to land in front of the rearguard girls.

A moment later, I was in a different area entirely. Arisa must have used the Space Magic spell Mazemaker without a chant.

The only way out of this space was to either find the exit or break through the entire illusion by force.

But I didn’t need to do either of those. After all, those kinds of barriers don’t work on me.

I took a single step forward, and I was back outside the barrier, in the presence of my great lord, in the dungeonmaster’s chamber.

“No way...how’d you get out so fast?!”

“Create Behemoth!”

Mia’s magic invocation overlapped Arisa’s surprised cry.

Her Spirit Magic activated, and a pseudo-spirit behemoth emerged from a beautiful magic circle.

Looking up at it like this, it certainly made for an imposing site.

“The Spirit Magic of the high elves?! Listen, you! Hurry up and get rid of that thing!”

My master gave me another order.

With the aid of my Magic Hand, I grabbed the gigantic behemoth and flung it away.

PUWAOOOOOWNNNN!!

Its limbs flailed in the air as it went flying.

I'd thrown it because my order was to get rid of it, but if I stopped there, he might tell me to exterminate it. And that would make Mia sad, so I used Explosion Magic to make a smoke screen while I popped the behemoth out of the labyrinth with Unit Deployment.

““Deracinator’!”

I kicked the barrier that appeared in front of Arisa, shattering it.

Through the shards, I caught a glimpse of Arisa's and the others' faces, though they were mostly obscured by the red spiderweb patterns taking over my vision.

“...Master?”



“Satou...”

Arisa, Lulu, and Mia looked tearful as they called out to me.

My head throbbed, and the red pattern got even denser.

“Master!” Liza leaped at me from the side. “Please, do not forget about us.”

The red afterimages flickered and pulsed.

“Don’t forget Pochi, either, sir.”

“Tama tooo.”

Pochi and Tama crowded around me.

The red patterns flickered faster, more and more intensely.

“Master, you must remember my breasts, I declare.”

Nana threw off her armor and pressed her chest against me.

The unpleasant red patterns kept tormenting me, distracting me from the soft sensation.

Get out of here.

I waved my hand to clear the red patterns from my eyes...



...Oh, I see.

As soon as the red patterns vanished, my mind became clear again.

I quickly looked at my log and saw that I’d been bound under Orchidee’s Geist.

While he was controlling me, I apparently followed his orders and even attacked my own friends. I was beyond ashamed.

The red spiderweb patterns in my vision must have been displaying the Geist’s effects. When I finally broke free, my head hurt horribly, like I’d damaged some brain cells in the process. I turned my “Pain Resistance” skill on and checked my HP gauge; it had already fully recovered, thanks to the “Self-Healing” skill.

“What is the matter with you?! Do not hesitate! Beat up those women and children at once!”

Hearing Orchidee’s words, the girls only clung to me more tightly.

I had better reassure them right away.

“I’m sorry, everyone.”

With that, I used visual Unit Deployment to teleport out of their grasp.

“Master...”

Tears flooded down Arisa’s cheeks as she called after me.

Huh?

Oh, does she think I’m still being controlled?

“That’s it!” the idiot shouted. *“Hurry up and do it!”*

I guess I should deal with him first.

I used “Warp” to teleport directly in front of Orchidee.

“Wha—?!”

Before he could use another Geist, I snatched the Xanthic Staff out of his hands.

I must have used a bit too much force, because it sent Orchidee flying in a sort of triple Axel.

> Skill Acquired: “Robbery”

> Skill Acquired: “Theft”

> Skill Acquired: “Pickpocket”

> Title Acquired: Robber

> Title Acquired: Mugger

I got a barrage of skills and titles for the first time in a while.

I don’t think “pickpocket” really applies here, but whatever—there’s no point arguing with the skill and title system.

“Master! You’ve come back to us!”

Arisa and the others finally noticed my change in condition.

“I’m so sorry for upsetting all of you.”

“Damn yooou! Servants! Prepare my magic circle!”

Orchidee’s enslaved mages began the chant.

“Liza, please!”

“I’m on i—!”

“Wait.”

Liza started to dash forward at Arisa’s request, until I stopped her with a hand signal.

I gave another hand signal for them to retreat, sending the group to safety.

Then I pointed the Xanthic Staff at Orchidee.

“You fool! Stealing that staff will not help you. I just used the last of the witch’s power that was sealed inside it. Now it is nothing more than a useless decoration!”

Orchidee rambled on.

I knew that from my AR display already, of course. No, I had a different goal.

Ignoring Orchidee’s ranting, I used my menu to put skill points into the “Geist Resistance” and “Geist” skills and activated them.

At the same time, the servant mages finished the Geist Support Magic circle.

Orchidee sneered evilly as I stood unmoving.

“Obey me! ■■■ Geist!”

He activated the Geist spell.

I looked at the Xanthic Staff I’d been holding up toward him.

...It worked.

The information in my AR display was exactly what I wanted.

I quietly lowered the staff so that it no longer pointed at Orchidee.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha! You idiot! Did you think your high level would protect you?!”

It seems the first Geist didn't take properly, but the same Geist cast two-and threefold is even harder to resist!"

I see. Thanks for the useful explanation.

However, without Arisa's "Never Give Up" sealed in the Xanthic Staff, "Geist" wasn't so all-powerful that it could make up for my new "Resistance" skill and overwhelmingly higher level.

I could tell without looking at my log that I'd successfully resisted it.

"I forbid you from using the 'Geist' skill."

"What are you talking about?"

"<Let the twilight dawn.>"

Ignoring Orchidee's confusion, I spoke the incantation to use the Xanthic Staff.

"What are you playing at?"

"I sealed your 'Geist' skill into this thing, that's what."

"As if I'd fall for such a ridiculous bluff!"

Orchidee gave the order to his mages to make another magic circle, evidently intending to use "Geist" again.

"I wouldn't use that skill if I were you. Don't say I didn't warn you, all right?"

"Enough of your drivel! Obey me! ■■■—"

I shut my eyes.

"—'Geist'!"

Orchidee used "Geist."

Little did he know that he was signing his own death warrant.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

A terrible scream echoed through the dungeonmaster's chamber.

When the scream faded, and I heard the thud of something hitting the floor, I opened my eyes to see Orchidee collapsed and bleeding profusely from every

orifice.

> Title Acquired: Dungeonmaster Killer

> Title Acquired: Dungeon Conqueror: Sacrificial Labyrinth

“Master! Are you all right?!”

Unfortunately, Orchidee’s scream brought everyone running back into the room.

They gasped when they saw the gruesome corpse.

“Wow, Master, you can be ruthless when you want to be.”

“I didn’t kill him. If anything, he killed himself.”

I charged Orchidee’s “Geist” skill in the Xanthic Staff and used it to forbid him from using the “Geist” skill again, and I told him as much, too.

Orchidee is the one who assumed I was bluffing, went against the direct order I’d placed him under with the Geist, and died as a result.

It’s his fault for not knowing what his own staff was capable of.

Luckily, absorbing the skill once was enough to charge it for three uses, so I could still use it to free Arisa and Lulu from their Geists.

The enslaved mages all screamed and fell when Orchidee died, but they weren’t dead according to my AR. I left them lying unconscious and figured I’d deal with it when they woke up.



“Master, look up there! Sir!”

I followed Pochi’s gaze and saw what looked like a transparent red jewel, glowing as it materialized.

“Master, what is that? I inquire.”

“It’s...”

My AR display gave me the answer.

“...the Dungeon Core.”

Countless black lights flickered inside the gleaming core.

It was similar to a City Core, though a bit more sinister.

The Dungeon Core slowly descended to the floor.

I reached out automatically, until a silent voice stopped me.

You must not touch that.

“Someone’s heeere?”

Tama was looking fixedly at what appeared to be an empty spot, like a cat staring at nothing.

I examined the spot for a while, and soon the faint outlines of figures came into view.

...Arisa?

“Mother! Father!” Arisa cried out to the figures.

The handsome man in a diadem and a lovely woman in a tiara soundlessly floated to her side.

Several younger boys and girls appeared, too, and gathered near Arisa’s parents.

“My big brothers! Sitam, Dudo... Aryus, Berits... and my big sisters, too...!”

A clever boy and a mischievous one looked at her with smiles, while the other two young men turned away in different directions. Still, Arisa seemed happy to see all of them.

The young girls she called her sisters just stared at her in a daze, as if their selves and memories were already fading.

“Lulu, you should go see them, too.”

“B-but I’m just an illegitimate child...”

“It’s fine. Look.”

Seeing Lulu’s hesitation, the king nodded at her with a warm expression.

As Lulu still hung back, I gave her a gentle push.

“...Your Majesty.”

The ghost of the king looked a little forlorn at Lulu’s timid words.

“Lulu, call him Father at least this one last time, won’t you?”

“...Is that all right?”

“Of course it is, silly!”

At Arisa’s prompting, Lulu raised her head to look up at the king.

“...Father.”

At this, the king beamed warmly back at Lulu.

I turned my “Keen Hearing” skill off and ushered the rest of the group out of earshot to give them some space.

We watched from a distance as Arisa and Lulu said their final farewells to the royal family.

Eventually, Arisa beckoned us back over.

“Already? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

“I got to say good-bye to my father.”

Arisa and Lulu nodded, their cheeks still stained with tears.

“We’d like to free our family with our own hands. Is that all right?”

I nodded, giving them permission to destroy the Dungeon Core.

Lulu took the Fireburst Gun out of her Fairy Pack and pointed it at the Dungeon Core. She and Arisa both charged it with their magic.

Just to be safe, I destroyed the barrier around the Dungeon Core with my fist, and used the Practical Magic spell Mana Drain to steal its magic power.

“Good-bye, Father, Mother, brothers, and sisters.”

“Farewell, Father.”

Arisa and Lulu pulled the trigger together.

Its defenses lost, the Dungeon Core shattered easily.

A somehow holy light poured down from above, bathing the ghosts, whose expressions grew peaceful.

The sisters who had already lost their sense of selves were the first to disappear, then the young princes. Aryus and Berits raised their hands lightly toward Arisa as they ascended. The mischievous-looking Dudo wore a grin that seemed to say “See ya!” while he rose out of sight, and the gentle-faced Sitam waved at Arisa and Lulu with a small smile as he followed.

Even if we couldn’t hear their voices, it was clear how much they loved Arisa.

The queen seemed to notice something and motioned for Lulu to look behind her.

“...Mother!”

“Lili!”

Arisa followed suit, and her eyes widened.

There stood a beautiful black-haired woman with Japanese features and the garb of a lady’s maid.

This must be Lulu’s mother. Since she was transparent, she must be a ghost, too.

The king’s ghost came to stand next to Lulu’s mother, Lili. Looking around, I realized the queen was nowhere in sight. She must have gone on ahead to give them a moment to say good-bye.

Lili and Lulu gazed at each other.

“I’m all right, Mother. I have Arisa and Mast—I mean, Lord Satou, and all our friends, too. I’m happy now, I really am. So you don’t need to worry about me.”

“That’s right! We get to spend every day cozying up with our beloved, so just relax and wait for us up in heaven!”

Lili and the king looked pleased by Lulu’s and Arisa’s words.

When they looked over at me, I gave a noble bow and told them, *“I’ll look after them, I promise.”*

Lili bowed her head to me deeply, and the king gestured as if to pat my

shoulder, his face seeming to say, *“Take good care of my daughters.”*

I nodded back, and the king and Lili began rising to the heavens, looking satisfied.

“Father! Brother Eruus is in the capital city of Kageus County! You should go say good-bye!”

Arisa called out to the king as he disappeared.

“Do you think he heard me?”

“Yes, I’m sure he went to see Eruus.”

Lulu nodded at Arisa.

The two wiped away their tears, their smiles somehow looking clearer than ever.

Uprising

Satou here. When I hear the phrase citizen uprising, the French Revolution immediately comes to mind, but I can't think of any concrete examples of "taking back a country." Maybe it just makes for a better story when they solve the problem before the country gets taken away entirely?

"Shakyyyyy?"

"The ground is going rumble-rumble, sir."

Tama and Pochi broke the pensive silence that had settled over the dungeonmaster's chamber.

Before I could open my map to see if my unpleasant hunch was right, the ground shook so violently that it nearly knocked us off our feet.

Small pebbles and clumps started falling from the ceiling, soon mingled with increasingly large rocks, as the foundation of the dungeonmaster's room began to crumble.

"Well, that's not good."

I used Flexible Shield and Magic Hand to protect everyone as we clustered together.

"Satou."

"Master, the dungeonmaster's minions are still unconscious, I report."

Oh, right. I almost forgot.

For some reason, they all passed out the moment Orchidee died.

I grabbed the black-robed minions with Magic Hand and took them along as I teleported everyone out of the collapsing labyrinth with Return.

The chimera knights we freed earlier on the twentieth floor had apparently

escaped already, since they were nowhere to be found in the labyrinth. A few of them must have had the route to the exit memorized.

“Whah, it’s shaking out here, too.”

“Yes, Lulu. It reminds me of being on a ship in the ocean, I report.”

We’d escaped to the shade of some trees at one corner of the royal castle.

“The castle is sinking, sir!”

“Unbelieeeevable?”

The castle, which was directly above the labyrinth, was evidently collapsing along with the labyrinth.

Fortunately, since it was already half-ruined from the demon attack Arisa mentioned, there was no one inside to get caught up in the destruction.

The Yowork Kingdom soldiers stationed near the entrance of the labyrinth were fleeing in a panic.

“Master, will the town be all right?”

“Yes, it looks like it’s just the immediate area of the castle that’s sinking. There aren’t any serious injuries to anyone in Kuvork City.”

Liza and the others looked relieved at the information I relayed from my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance.

“Saaafe?”

“That’s one liver shining, sir.”

I think Pochi meant to say “silver lining.”

“...You brought them along, too, I see.”

“Yeah. They know who I am now, but I wouldn’t be able to sleep well at night if I left them there to die.”

Arisa looked listlessly at Orchidee’s mage servants.

Before they lost consciousness, they found out that Nanashi the Hero is really Satou.

For the time being, I had the beastfolk girls and Nana tie them up and gag

them so they wouldn't be able to flee or use magic.

"Master, the servants are wearing iron masks, I report."

"Iron masks...?"

Nana showed me the oval-shaped iron masks on the faces of the servants under their hoods. The masks covered everything but their mouths, and I couldn't see where the masks were attached.

Since I couldn't figure out how else to remove them, I put the iron masks in my Storage.

"Mew!"

"That looks painful, sir!"

Under the masks, the servants were mostly young men and women, and all were terribly transfigured. While most of them were only affected in small places, there were a few who had more than half of their faces grotesquely altered. Those with more natural beauty were more severely transformed, although that might be a coincidence.

"Oh, how awful...!"

"Chimera."

"I see, so he experimented on them, too..."

Lulu, Mia, and Arisa all looked aghast.

Come to think of it, there was some mention of this in Orchidee's research journal on the twenty-fourth floor.

They had Doom Needles in their brains like the chimera knights, so I removed those into Storage, too.

"There are surgical scars on their bodies, too, I report."

"It looks like he implanted monster cores over their hearts."

The structure reminded me a bit of those Demonic Heart devices.

Orchidee must have been modifying them to help get around the conditions for using Geist.

“Nngh...”

One of the chimera mages groaned. They must be starting to wake up.

I told the rest of the group to hide and disguised myself as Kuro.

“Where are we?”

“Outside the labyrinth.”

The young man who’d woken up looked around.

“Outside? ...And you are?”

“I’m Kuro, retainer of Nanashi the Hero.”

“Wow, a hero! So the person who was fighting Orchidee was a hero, then?”

...That’s odd.

The boy didn’t seem to know who they’d been fighting.

“You all saw him, didn’t you?”

“...No. The masks we were wearing didn’t let us see or hear anything. All we could hear was Orchidee’s orders... Wait, my mask is gone?” He started patting his face. “But Orchidee said they could never be removed...”

“Such is the hero’s power.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to give an arbitrary excuse.

At any rate, this was a lucky break for me, since it meant they didn’t find out my secret identity.

“What did Orchidee order you to do?”

My AR display confirmed that they had all been turned into slaves, just like Arisa and Lulu.

“Just ‘obey me.’”

I should be able to free them from slavery without a problem, then.

Since the person they were supposed to obey was dead, there was probably no need to find a way to get rid of their Geists.

The other chimeras started waking up as we talked. There were no cries of

despair about their transfigured faces and bodies; they must have known already.

“What are you going to do now? Rather, what do you *want* to do?”

“Nothing, really. Our families were all killed by those Yowork bastards. And the one who enslaved us, Orchidee...”

“He’s dead.”

“Did he...die a painful death?”

“Yes, it was gruesome.”

Enough to haunt my nightmares for a while.

“I see...”

The boy smiled darkly.

“In that case, once we repay you for saving us from Orchidee...I think I’ll invade the castle of Yowork Kingdom and fight until I’m killed. I must avenge His Majesty and the royal family...”

Uh-oh. Terrorism is never a good idea. I’d better talk him out of this.

“You shouldn’t throw your life away.”

“But there’s nothing else left for me to do.”

“If you’re that loyal to your king, then you serve the surviving prince in his efforts to rebuild your homeland.”

And don’t do any terrorism.

“The surviving prince...? One of His Highnesses survived?!”

The boy’s face brightened, as did the others’.

“He fled to a neighboring land and is hard at work to rebuild the kingdom. Do you want me to take you there?”

“Yes, please!”

Phew, I managed to talk them out of becoming terrorists.

The chimera knights who escaped ahead of us were locked in the tail end of a

bloody battle against the Yowork soldiers stationed outside the castle and had just been cornered in an alley in the old nobles' quarters. I hurried to their rescue.

Then I set the chimera mages and knights free from their slavery contracts, using the same method as used on the slave soldiers we freed before, and brought them to the safe house I made on the edge of Kageus County.

Unlike the slave soldiers, I suspected these chimera experiment victims would be stopped at the gates, due to their appearance.

"I'll bring two people with me. The rest, wait here."

The chimera knights and mages each chose a representative, and I gave them cloaks to hide their appearances and brought them along. Rather than deal with getting through the gates, we went in from above, under cover of night instead.



"Lord Kuro!"

When we reached Eruus's headquarters, one of the former slave soldiers spotted me and exclaimed.

"So you're the 'Kuro' I've heard about? Thank you for saving our soldiers from such terrible circumstances."

Eruus came to the front of the group until the elderly consul held him back.

"Your Highness, you mustn't expose yourself to danger."

"Exactly! We still don't know who this man really is."

"Of course we do! The people he rescued said he was the retainer of a hero!"

Eruus protested against his advisers.

"But we have no way of knowing if that is true. He has been misrepresenting himself as a part of your service, too."

Misrepresenting?

Right, I guess I'd been using the prince's name without permission.

"That was just to reassure the soldiers, wasn't it?"

“Yes, exactly.”

Eruus seemed to understand what I was doing, at least.

“But Your Highness! The fact remains that he gave your name without permission!”

“Anyone who would do such a thing cannot be the true retainer of a hero!”

“Exactly! He needs to prove his identity!”

“Enough already. I don’t need to prove anything to you...”

Maybe I shouldn’t have used Eruus’s name without asking, but all this ranting and raving was more annoying than anything.

“Excuse me?!”

“Now he shows his true colors!”

Several of the prince’s vassals got even angrier.

“...But since you insist on hindering our conversation, I will show you the light of the Holy Short Sword that my lord Nanashi the Hero gave me.”

I reached into my cloak and produced one of my cast-made Holy Short Swords from Storage, charging it with magic.

All eyes fell on the holy blue light that flowed from the blade.

“A Holy Weapon...”

“So he truly does serve a hero!”

“Does that mean Prince Eruus has a hero for an ally?!”

“Amazing, Your Highness!”

“You are the true successor to Kuvork Kingdom!”

“All hail Prince Eruus!”

“Hip, hip, hooray!”

Dammit. That was supposed to shut them up, not make them even noisier.

“Master, bad news!”

Just then, Arisa contacted me with the advanced Space Magic spell World

Phone.

“What’s the matter?”

“I heard something in the city, and when I checked with Clairvoyance, I saw...”

Evidently, there were fights and fires breaking out all over Kuvork City.

Judging by the map information, I gathered that Eruus’s agents had decided to take advantage of the Yowork Kingdom soldiers’ distraction with the castle sinking and started an uprising with the resistance members.

“All right. I’ll get back as soon as I can. Keep an eye on things for me, please.”

I used “Warp” to teleport next to the elderly adviser and whispered this information to him.

“Our secret agents did that?!”

“It’s going well right now while everything’s plunged into chaos, but if the Yowork Kingdom soldiers calm down and regain control, the tide will turn quickly.”

I relayed the information I saw on my map.

“What?! Then there’s no time to waste! Listen closely, all of you!”

The elderly gentleman clapped his hands to gather everyone’s attention and declared that they were going to take back Kuvork City.

“All right. I’ll contact all the soldiers we’ve positioned on the ground.”

“I shall prepare to send out provisions.”

“I’ll gather the horses and carts.”

At the elderly consul’s orders, the vassals all ran off to take care of their duties.

“Prince Eruus, come with me to speak with Countess Kageus!”

“A-all right.”

“Kuro, I apologize that we cannot thank you properly at present. We shall reward your deeds once the kingdom is ours again.”

“Wait.”

I grabbed the elderly consul's shoulder before he could run out with Eruus.

I still hadn't accomplished my main goal here.

"Prince Eruus, these fine folks want to pledge their loyalty to you."

I presented the chimera knight and chimera mage representatives to Prince Eruus.

"Who...?"

"I am Baron Bosso's third son, Rohho the knight. Please forgive my rudeness in wearing a hood in your presence; my face is disfigured, you see."

"I am Baronet Hommer's fifth son, Iurin the mage. I swear my loyalty to you, Your Highness."

"This sword of mine, given to me by the king, is now sworn to your service."

"Sir Rohho, Sir Iurin, I gladly accept your loyalty."

"Heh, I couldn't be happier to serve you. My twelve knights and twenty-seven soldiers will all lend you their strength, Your Highness."

"And my fourteen mages will surely be of use as well."

"Great. Thanks!"

Prince Eruus responded with thanks befitting his young age.

While they were speaking, I gave Countess Kageus's medallion to the old gentleman. She'd given it to us as thanks for returning the belongings of a deceased relative. Hopefully, it would make her a little more willing to assist them.

"Prince, I'll gather as many forces as I can before dawn and send them to Kuvork City with my lord's secret power. You can ask the people I rescued about it if you don't believe me."

With that, I used Return to get back to Arisa and the others.



"Satou."

"Welcome baaack?"

When I arrived, Mia and Tama greeted me right away.

They'd all changed into a combination of black clothes and cloaks, probably because the golden armor stood out too much. These had recognition-inhibiting functions built in, too.

I changed from my Kuro disguise into matching black clothes.

"Thanks. Where's Arisa?"

"At the top of the tower."

Liza pointed at one of the sideways-leaning towers.

I headed over with "Skylarking," taking Mia and Tama in tow, since they grabbed onto me.

Arisa and Pochi were at the top, along with Lulu, who had a sniper rifle.

"Welcome back, Master. How did it go?"

"Perfect. Eruus and his people were very happy to have the help, so I'll bring them in later."

"Wait! Are you going to do something stupid again? Wouldn't it be safer to use my unique skill to open a gate instead?"

"It'll be fine. I'll shuttle back and forth, only taking a few people at a time."

"Make sure you keep an eye on the soul shell garland, all right?"

"I know."

Arisa was such a worrywart.

"So, when do you think my brother and his people can get here?"

"Dawn, they said."

Arisa furrowed her brow.

"Really, it's impressive that they can even set out before dawn on such short notice."

"I know that. It's just, things don't look great."

She handed me a longscope and pointed at the resistance encampment.

From the high ground of the castle tower, we could see the entire castle town at a glance.

“So the Yowork Kingdom army went on the offensive...”

“Yeah, and they’ve got the resistance pinned down in that building. At this rate, they’re going to have to risk it all on one charge, and lots of people will get hurt or killed.”

That wouldn’t be good.

“I wonder if we can tell the resistance leader somehow that Eruus is coming with reinforcements?”

“Hmm...I don’t know the leader, but there is someone I know down there. I can try telling him, at least.”

I should’ve written down the name. At least since Eruus didn’t have a lot of agents, I should be able to find the familiar face with my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance.

“...They’re on the move. The building with the red roof.”

Lulu, who was keeping an eye on things with her sniping scope, gave an update.

Part of the resistance was about to gamble on one last attack.

“It’s total chaos. They aren’t communicating with the rest of the resistance at all.”

Arisa looked frustrated.

It was going well when they first launched the surprise attack, but the Yowork Kingdom had recovered too quickly, and the organization was helping to drive back the resistance, too.

The resistance was taking serious losses and beginning to run away.

“Master, please.”

“All right. I’ll help the resistance escape.”

Since we were a little too far away, Arisa teleported me closer with Space Magic.

I brought Liza and Nana along to my side by using Unit Deployment.

“Lulu, you aim for the weapons of the Yowork Kingdom soldiers. Mia, use the Water Magic spell Balloon in the middle of the enemy camp. Arisa, you and I will attack the enemy knights and frontline commanders from afar.”

I gave her a warning not to kill them, and we began our attack.

Lulu used a gun with physical bullets to shoot at the swords and shields of the Yowork soldiers. A Fire Rod or Fireburst Gun would stand out too much in the middle of the night.

“We’re under fire! It’s not an archer! An assassin or sniper is hiding somewhere!”

“Where? Where’s it coming from?!”

The Yowork Kingdom soldiers slowed their attack in their panic, taking cover wherever they could find it.

“What are you fools doing?! They can’t snipe us if we get through to enemy lines! Just run at them like your lives depend on it!”

A Yowork Kingdom officer gave a haughty command from behind them.

Just then, Mia’s Balloon burst in their midst.

“Yeek, a magic attack!”

“It’s either ‘Water Shot’ or ‘Swirl Blade’! Take cover, quick!”

Despite the orders she gave her subordinates, the officer was quick to cower behind something and look around wildly when she got a taste of Mia’s magic.

That didn’t stop Arisa’s knockout blast from hitting her in the head. Judging by the way she lay out flat on the ground, it must have knocked her out immediately.

“Mia, hit a few more places, please.”

“Mm, got it.”

Mia puffed up her chest and began her next chant.

“I am a knight of the Yowork Kingdom, Kuvork field army, third—”

I used Magic Hand to bonk the soldier on the head, mid-speech, with a nearby rock, knocking him unconscious. A resistance fighter ran over to finish him off, but other knights managed to drag him to safety.

“Master, I wish to fight, I declare.”

“Pochi wants to pew-pew with ‘Spellshot,’ sir!”

“Tama wants to ninjaaa?”

Nana, Pochi, and Tama were eager to join the fray.

Though Liza didn’t say anything, it looked like she felt the same way.

“‘Spellblade’ will stand out too much at night—”

As I spoke, I saw some knights on horseback with golems in tow approaching the scene.

“Liza, Pochi, and Nana, destroy those golems with ‘Spellblade.’ Stay on the move while you attack, so they won’t find you.”

On my orders, the three headed out to attack.

“And Tamaaa?”

Tama looked disappointed that she hadn’t gotten orders.

“I have a special mission for you, Ninja Tama. Toss pebbles at the horses to get them to lose control. Use pepper shots to punish any knights who come your way.”

“Aye! Nin-niiin?”

Tama promptly vanished into the darkness.

“Whoa, horsey!”

“Gaah, what the...? *Koff, koff!* Aaaargh!”

Before long, the knights had fallen from their rearing horses.

The talented ninja Tama had thrown the pepper shots into their eyes just as their horses lost control.

“Where’s the shooter?!”

“We’re under magic attack, too—oof!”

“What is the captain doing?!”

Thanks to the gang’s efforts, the Yowork army was in total disarray.

Now’s my chance...

While the resistance was still trying to figure out what was happening, I spotted a familiar face. It was the man I met at the bar, who worked for Prince Eruus.

I shot an arrow letter at his feet to tell him that Eruus’s reinforcements would arrive in the early dawn.

I watched as the agent found the letter and read it.

“It’s Prince Eruus’s advance team that’s helping us!” he called to the rest of the resistance. “We’ll have reinforcements at dawn!”

Luckily, he believed the letter. Maybe my “Secret Maneuvers” skill helped with that.

“Oh, good. Looks like they’re going to stay put until reinforcements arrive.”

The resistance started piling up furniture and rocks around the doors and windows of the building, creating a barricade.

“That won’t hold up to fire by itself...”

I used the Earth Magic spell Wall to shore up their base’s defenses, adding a lookout tower at each corner while I was at it.

“Nice work, Master. Liza and the others defeated the golem team already, so it looks like Yowork Kingdom is going to fall back for now to regroup, too.”

“That should buy us enough time until dawn.”

Thus far, it didn’t look like the Yowork Kingdom army was going to use the City Core’s power.

Maybe they just didn’t see the resistance as enough of a threat, but I suspected that there wasn’t enough magic power in the core, judging by the state of the crops and climate within Kuvork City.

We took turns taking naps while others kept watch. The night passed uneventfully, and soon the sun began to emerge from behind the mountains.

It looked like the Yowork Kingdom army was planning to go back on the offensive at dawn. Their garrisons near the capital building were getting ready to depart.

It was almost time for the big finish.



“I’m going to get the reinforcements. Can you handle things here?”

“Yep, no problem. I’ll contact you if the Yowork Kingdom army attacks.”

I changed into my Kuro disguise.

When I used Return to get back to Kageus County, I found some three-hundred armed soldiers gathered a fair distance away from the city.

I used “Flashrunning” to hurry over to them.

“Looks like you’re all prepared.”

“Lord Kuro!”

“Whoa, floating down from the sky? You hero folks know how to make an entrance.”

While most of the people seemed stunned by my sudden appearance, the elderly consul and the general looked up and addressed me calmly.

“Did you see that, old man?! A person flew across the sky!”

Eruus ran over to the old gentleman, tugging on his sleeve excitedly.

Maybe I could take him for a spin in the air once everything settled down.

“Just three hundred, eh...?”

I should be able to transport that amount in just a few rounds.

“This is the best we could do in one night’s notice. We know it ain’t enough to take down a whole city. But if our attack can help the uprising on the inside, that’s good enough for us.”

The general seemed to have misunderstood my words.

“That isn’t what I meant. I was saying that I can transport this number to Kuvork City.”

“Transport? What, with an airship?”

“I do have one of those, but we won’t be using it this time.”

I used Magic Hand to grab the general and a group of soldiers.

“Don’t try to resist. I’m going to teleport us to Kuvork City.”

“Wh-what?”

I took sixty people there in one trip using Unit Deployment.

“Wh-where are we?”

“Kuvork City, in the former nobles’ quarters.”

There was no one around in the charred remains of this place, and plenty of wide-open spaces, so I’d used the Create Stone Object spell to create some temple-style structures without ceilings to serve as a teleportation base.

“Wait here. I’ll bring the rest.”

With a few short words to the general, I continued shuttling back and forth a few times. I checked the soul shell garland to ensure it was still normal each time before I used Unit Deployment, just as I promised Arisa.

Partway through the shuttling process, Arisa sent word that the Yowork Kingdom was advancing again.

The rebels’ defenses should hold for a little while, especially with the earth walls I made.

“This place is still all burnt up... Wait, where’s the castle?!”

In the last round of transport, I brought Eruus, who yelped in surprise when he saw the destruction left by the sinking beneath the castle.

I would’ve preferred not to bring him to the battlefield, but he was very insistent, and his elderly consul agreed that it was necessary for the revival of their kingdom.

While the old gentleman wasn’t a combatant by any means, Eruus had

bodyguards that followed him like shadows and would no doubt keep him safe.

“Master, they’ve broken through the earth walls! They brought in a giant Magic Cannon that was used for defending the city walls!”

Using a powerful wartime weapon within the city walls? That was awfully dangerous.

“Arisa, keep an eye on things a little longer. You can hinder them a little bit if need be, just no direct interference until Eruus and his reinforcements arrive.”

“I know. I’ll just use ‘Deracinator’ to keep them from advancing too much.”

After the conversation with Arisa, I told Eruus the situation.

He immediately ordered the general to go to the aid of the resistance, and the three hundred soldiers marched through the familiar wreckage of their homeland.

“Here, take this. Protect that precious life of yours.”

I handed an Echigoya Company-made shield bracelet to Eruus and turned away.

“You aren’t going to help us take back the royal capital, Lord Kuro?!”

“I believe I’ve helped more than enough already. Technically, we aren’t supposed to get involved in interpersonal wars at all.”

Eruus looked down, disappointed.

“Lord Kuro, thank you for all your help.”

“I just did my part because a little girl asked me to help you. If you must thank someone, thank the cheeky girl with purple hair.”

“Purple hair? Do you mean Arisa?!”

I used Return to teleport back to my group without answering Eruus’s question.

Hopefully, that would lessen Eruus’s subordinates’ resentment toward Arisa a little.



“What are the dregs of Kuvork Kingdom doing in the city?!”

The battlefield was in chaos.

This was thanks to Eruus and his army suddenly showing up and attacking the Yowork Kingdom from the side just when they had gained the upper hand, owing to the Magic Cannon.

“Who the hell are those knights?!”

“Is it ‘Body Strengthening’?”

“No, I saw one block a sword with his bare arm. Maybe they have that ‘Indestructible Body’ skill I’ve heard rumors about...”

The chimera knights were laying waste to the battlefield as if to vent all their pent-up rage.

Evidently, having mutations like hydra hides and naga scales on their arms allowed them to block even a steel blade, unharmed.

“The Magic Cannon! Mow them all down!”

“But Your Excellency! We’re in the middle of the city!”

“Shut up! No one lives here but those Kuvork filth anyw—”

Before he could finish his sentence, wind and flames suddenly engulfed the Magic Cannon and its surroundings, including the frontline commander.

“Mages?!”

“Someone’s attacking us!”

Before the Yowork Kingdom army could grasp the situation, magic attacks pelted their encampment like rain.

“Where in the world did they get so many mages?!”

“Call in the soldiers guarding the castle walls!”

“Pull our men back for now, and ask the viceroy for aid.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up murmurs of the Kuvork Kingdom army’s strategy.

Eruus and his army seemed to have joined up with the resistance

encampment; I could hear voices praising him and cheering for imminent victory.

“Rejoice while you can. Once the viceroy’s aid arrives, you’ll rue the day you were born.”

The surviving commander muttered darkly as he began to lead the retreat.

It turned out to be more than just sour grapes: Soon, light shone in the armor and weapons of the Yowork Kingdom soldiers, and they began their counterattack.

Based on what I heard, the viceroy must have used the City Core to give the soldiers a boost.

However, it looked like the core didn’t have much magic to spare—almost a third of the soldiers in back were missing the glow of the boost.

“Yowork bastards! We won’t lose to the likes of you!”

“You’ll taste the strength of someone who’s lost all hope for human happiness!”

Even with the boost, they evidently weren’t strong enough to compete individually with the chimera knights.

Only the highest-level Yowork Kingdom knights were able to fight the chimera knights in an even match.

“Grrr, stop fighting one-on-one! Use our strength in numbers to surround them!”

“You damn cowards!”

“Now we’ve got ’em! Wear them down!”

The Yowork Kingdom commander appeared to have realized they outnumbered the resistance almost four-to-one and could use that to their advantage.

“What should we do, Master? Meddling alone isn’t going to give them enough support.”

Arisa was right. At this rate, the difference in numbers would overwhelm the

resistance.

“All right. You have my permission to join the fight... Just be careful not to get hurt.”

“Should we change into our golden armor?”

“No, you can wear your normal public equipment this time. Just don’t use anything with a crest on it.”

Since I was also trying to improve Arisa’s negative reputation, I decided to have the group participate as themselves instead of in their “hero’s attendant” golden armor.

Meanwhile, I used Clairvoyance to keep an eye out and support them as needed.

“Pochi will take the lead, sir.”

“Chaaarge?”

“Don’t run ahead while I’m doing my battle pose, sir!”

I could heard Pochi and Tama through Arisa’s activated Tactical Talk spell.

“Some little thing is coming at us!”

“Th-they’re so strong! Are they dwarfs?!”

“S-stop them! Someone stop them!”

Tama and Pochi dashed through the ranks, slashing at the soldiers’ legs.

When they vanished from the road, they left a trail of men lying on the ground, clutching their legs.

Some of the civilians ran out from their homes to attack the downed soldiers with frying pans and chairs. While the protection of the City Core kept them from being killed, it was probably poetic justice for the civilians to take out their anger on the soldiers.

“Sir Knight! Look out!”

“I am the greatest knight of the Yowork Kingdom, Sir—”

“Liza of the Black Spear. Here I come!”

Liza charged at the knight without waiting for his introduction, leaving a trail of red light in her spear's wake.

The knight only managed to block a few of her hits before going down, even with the support of the City Core boost.

If she wasn't holding back to avoid killing anyone, she probably would've knocked him out with the first blow.

"Who is that spear user? She's taking out Yowork knights left and right."

"I don't remember anyone like that from Kuvork Kingdom."

"She must be an ally of Prince Eruus. Let's take out the rest of 'em while we have the chance!"

Liza's prowess seemed to raise the morale of the Kuvork Kingdom soldiers.

Fwoom.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"I didn't hear a thing. Just keep moving, man."

A Yowork Kingdom soldier who was helping to carry a Magic Cannon down from the castle tower looked around nervously.

Fwoom, fwoom.

"I definitely heard something."

"I told you, just—"

As the other soldier started to snap at him, they were both attacked by a shock wave.

Several translucent little girls—sylph spirits—floated around them.

"Sylphs, destroy the cannon."

Fwoom.

On Mia's order, the sylphs pulled the Magic Cannon up into the air and destroyed it.

"Sylphs, next."

Fwoom.

The sylphs sped onward toward the next canon.

Thus, the plan to bring more Magic Cannons to the front lines fell to pieces without ever seeing the light of day.

"...Hmm?"

I spotted a Yowork Kingdom spy making his way around the front lines.

It looked like he intended to attack the noncombatants being sheltered at the rear. Maybe he was going to take them hostage to try to force Eruus to surrender.

Nana, who was hidden near Eruus's headquarters, was the closest.

"Nana, an enemy soldier is approaching from nine o'clock. Stop him, please."

"Yes, Master. I won't let anyone harm the larvae, I declare."

As gallant as that was, I'd prefer that she protect everyone, regardless of age.

I checked the map again and saw something strange happening outside the city, too.

"Arisa, take Lulu and head to the south tower."

"Okey-dokey!"

"...Eek!"

Arisa's and Lulu's dots on my radar appeared at the unoccupied tower on the outer wall.

"Arisa, Lulu, look at the border fortress."

"Something's moving."

"Are those...golems?"

"Yeah. They're even breaking out their border defenses to send them here."

"Should we stop them?"

"Please."

"Lulu, do you think you can hit them from here? It's pretty far."

“Yes, no problem... See?”

The laser gun flashed a few times, and the dots indicating the golems on my map disappeared.

Lulu was really a pro sniper with those Magic Guns now.

Arisa and I praised Lulu’s impressive feat.

Kwee, kwee!

I heard a bat’s cry in the back of my mind.

It was the Shadowdive Bat I had hidden near the viceroy. I tuned into its mind and saw that the viceroy was making preparations for some kind of Ritual Magic.

“Arisa, the viceroy’s up to something. Want me to stop him?”

“No, I can do it. Do you mind fixing the tap, Master?”

“Sure thing.”

I headed to the City Core room to fix the tap.

Since the entrance had been blocked during the collapse of the castle, there were no guards.

I used Pitfall to open it back up, then forced the twisted door open with brute strength. There was a lethal barrier around it generated by the City Core itself, so I used a full-blast Break Magic to stop it. Sure, I probably could’ve walked through just fine, but I’m not a fan of taking unnecessary risks.

“O Lord, who controls a higher-ranking region. This land is registered as a satellite of Yowork City. If you steal it, it will be considered a declaration of war on that city. Do you accept?”

“That’s fine. I’ll register this as my satellite city.”

“Understood. O Lord, this land is now yours.”

Well, that was easier than I expected.

I wanted to change the designated lord later, like I did in Muno. However, if I did that, Eruus would automatically be freed from his slave status.

I had to free him from his Geist first, or there was a real risk that he might die like Orchidee for breaking the rules of the Geist.

I gave the City Core an order to overwrite and remove the boost being given to the Yowork Kingdom army.

“Question. What would happen if I unregistered this city as a satellite city of mine?”

“Whoever visits this place next would become its new lord.”

That should be fine, then.

Just to be safe, I put a barrier over the entrance that only Eruus could enter.

This way, no one would randomly wander in and wind up as the new lord.

“Take this, tyrant! ‘Blast Storm’!”

I turned my attention back to the Shadowdive Bat and found Arisa shouting nonsense while wiping the floor with the Yowork Kingdom’s viceroy and generals at their military headquarters, knocking them all out with her shock wave spell.

“Don’t go too far overboard.”

“Master? How are things going on your end?”

“It’s done. Once Eruus goes to the City Core room, he’ll inherit ownership.”

“Wow, that was fast. But that’s why we love and admire yooou!”

Arisa dropped another reference to a famous manga, joking around. Or maybe she really was just complimenting me.

“Master, the Yowork Kingdom soldiers stopped glowing and are starting to flee.”

Liza reported in via Tactical Talk.

I guess I successfully stopped the buff from the City Core.

“Arisa here. Looks like the people at the HQ are running away, too. The viceroy and general told them to fight to the bitter end, but their subordinates turned against them and cut them down.”

People take lives much too easily in this world.

“Pochi here, sir! Mr. Soldiers are running away from the north gates, sir.”

“Tama heeere? All quiet in the plazaaa?”

Pochi and Tama seemed to be enjoying imitating Arisa.

“Master, it looks like Arisa’s brother is declaring victory in the plaza, I report.”

I used a visual Unit Deployment to move to where I could see the plaza and used it again to summon the rest of my group.

Maybe I was using Unit Deployment a little too much, but this was an important moment. I wanted everyone to see it together.

“Victory is ours! I hereby declare the reestablishment of the Kuvork Kingdom!”

Eruus stood on a hastily built platform.

“Huzzaaaaah!”

“Three cheers for Prince Eruus!”

“All hail our new king!”

At Eruus’s declaration, his vassals, soldiers, and even the former Kuvork Kingdom citizens who had gathered there all erupted into cheers.

“Congratulations, big brother.”

“Well done, Lord Eruus.”

Arisa and Lulu also congratulated Eruus more quietly as he stood at the center of the crowd. The other kids did, too, of course.

“Glory to the Kuvork Kingdom!”

“Glory to King Eruus!”

“Huzzaaaaah!”

After being so cruelly oppressed by Yowork Kingdom, the people were enthusiastic about supporting Eruus. Some of them were just yelling incoherently, not that I could blame them.

That being said, Eruus and his staff were still in for a lot of hard work. Taking back their land was only the beginning of a long, arduous process. He would have to rebuild his military might to fend off any attacks from Yowork Kingdom or threats of monsters, rebuild the city that had been laid to waste in the battle, and a whole mountain of other tasks.

“Let’s go, Master.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, we’ll let Eruus handle things from here. Besides, there’s something else I’d rather be doing right now...”

Arisa looked up at me with a mischievous grin.

A Bitter Battlefield

“I love fighting powerful opponents. There’s nothing more thrilling than a no-holds-barred battle to the death with someone truly strong. I don’t mind dying on the battlefield if it means I can have the hottest battle ever.”

—Ryuona the Grass Cutter, Eighth Seat of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen

“There’s so damn many of them.”

Ryuona of the Shiga Eight looked across at the battle about to unfold in a grassy field between mountains.

This was a critical travel point at the tip of Vistall Duchy. Some 7,500 royal army soldiers and 9,200 rebel soldiers were facing off at a distance. Both were using Earth Magic and golems to build up encampments and trenches, and there were messengers and familiars rushing to and fro.

Ryuona stood atop a watchtower crudely built with Earth Magic, overlooking both sides.

“I never expected the rebel army to challenge us to a field battle, that I did not.”

“Nor I. The obvious move would be to buckle down behind their castles and city walls.”

At Ryuona’s side, the Shiga Eight candidates “Windblade” Bauen and “Whitelance” Kerun furrowed their brows at the rebel army’s unexpected strategy.

“It’s because we have His Excellency the Duke on our side. Their greatest fear is that he will enter the city and take back control of the duchy.”

Their questions were answered by the deep baritone of Baronet Jelil Mosaddo, the Scarlet Nobleman, who had joined them atop the tower.

“Hey, welcome back, Jelil. You don’t need to protect the duke?”

“He finally consented to take shelter in the underground headquarters.”

“Good to hear.”

Kerun handed the longscope to Jelil.

“Tradition or not, the mere thought of His Excellency standing on the front lines when he can scarcely move on his own is enough to give me shivers.”

“It must be difficult coming from such a prestigious noble family, that it must.”

“Come, now. They’ve carried on this tradition since the era of the Ancestral King Yamato. We’re lucky His Excellency was willing to break it. Some idio—I mean, nobles—even try to lead the charge themselves.”

Kerun attempted to pacify the irritated Bauen.

“Enough chitchat. Their ace in the hole just showed up.”

Ryuona whirled her signature scythe around and pointed it at a shadow emerging from the mountains that towered behind the rebel army.

“You’d better show me a good time...dragon!”

Ryuona licked the edge of her battle scythe, her eyes glinting with excitement as she glared at the lesser dragon.

It was a strange sight. The lesser dragon was wearing a hat and holding a doll—no, it was a man in flashy clothing—in its right hand. While Ryuona and the others assumed this was an unfortunate victim, this man was actually the Yowork Kingdom tamer who had dragged the lesser dragon into fighting for the rebel army.

The lesser dragon moved quickly and was quick to forget orders once it got absorbed in fighting, which is why the tamer was accompanying it like this.

“The rebel army’s dragon is coming!”

Kerun shouted a warning down from the tower, and there was a flurry of sudden activity, like a hornet’s nest that had just been kicked.

The magic reactor fired up with a roar, constructing layer after layer of

defensive barriers.

All the priests and mages began chanting with looks of grim determination. The knights used their “Body Strengthening” and similar skills, while the archers and artillery began preparing long-distance attack skills.

It was clear that each man and woman was mustering their full strength.

Such is the terror of even a lesser dragon.

“Here I gooooo!”

Ryuona shot off like an arrow.

“Magic soldiers, bring that dragon down to the ground. If you can do that, we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Archers and artillery, aim for the abdomen, that you must! If you try to shoot at the wings, it will only get caught up in the Wind Magic that supports the wings and miss, that it will!”

Jelil and Bauen shouted to the soldiers in Ryuona’s place, as the latter was only focused on the enemy before her eyes.

“All of you, let’s move out!”

Kerun called out to the other five Shiga Eight candidates who were waiting at the bottom of the tower, and sprinted forward.

One of them stopped on the way and drew a navy-blue longbow.

“Lady Ryuona, allow me to signal the start of the battle! <Heavenly Arrow>!”

When he invoked the scripture, the archer’s Magic Bow showed its true worth. A red light shone from the bow and surrounded the Signal Arrow.

“Dragon who soars through the skies! Behold the power of the Heavenly Archer, ‘Over Dale’ Bauduin’s <Skyflash Shot>!”

Bauduin unleashed the arrow, along with a powerful shock wave and several rings of light.

The shining red arrow shot toward the dragon at the speed of sound.

It was fast—too fast to be avoided either by flight or by fall.

But the lesser dragon was undaunted. It somehow leaped in the middle of the sky and dodged the arrow. If a master living deep in the mountains used such a technique, it would likely be known as “Skywalking” or “Double-Jumping.”

The dragon’s hat seemed to be firmly set in place somehow; it rustled in the wind but didn’t fly off.

If anything, the tamer clutched in the dragon’s hand was more likely to break his neck from the high-speed maneuvers.

“...■ ***Turbulence Rankiryuu.***”

A wind mage disrupted the air around the dragon.

“...■■■ ***Fallen Hammer Ochikizuchi.***”

Immediately, several other mages followed up with a combo attack.

This was the gold-standard wyvern-hunting strategy that the Seiryuu County army specialized in.

“No way...”

“A dragon truly thrives in battle, that it does.”

The lesser dragon easily dodged the combo that would have brought any wyvern to the ground.

It sensed the oncoming disturbance in the air and folded its wings to dive out of the affected area, then used the same midair jump technique as before to dodge the Fallen Hammers.

“By the by, who is that fellow in the fancy garb?”

“The one the dragon’s holding? Probably its lunch, no?”

“No, he was with it before. I suspect it’s the Yowork Kingdom army’s tamer.”

The Shiga Eight candidate’s guess was correct.

“Tamer? I’ve never heard tell of one that can control a dragon, that I have not.”

“He’s probably using screws from the Weaselman Empire.”

Kerun offered his own guess to Bauen.

“Screws? Surely not,” Jelil objected. “Not long ago, there was a group that tried to control a many-winged centipede with seven of the things and failed.”

“Really? Well, if seven wouldn’t work, maybe they used thirty or so?”

Kerun pointed at the hat on the dragon’s head.

He seemed to be theorizing that there were screws underneath it.

GYA00000SZ.

The lesser dragon roared as it circled high in the air.

“It’s glowing. Putting up a fresh barrier?”

“Excellent. That means it’s acknowledged us as worthy opponents.”

“Hmph, I’d hardly call that ‘excellent.’ We’d be much better off if our enemy let its guard down against us.”

A broadsword user among the Shiga Eight candidates scorned Bauen’s words.

“What a dull fellow, that you are. I for one cannot bear to have an opponent look down on me if we are to fight to the death, that I cannot.”

Just as the broadsword user opened his mouth to retort again, Ryuona *tsked*, her eyes still fixed on the sky.

“...Not good.”

With that, Ryuona broke into a run.

She was headed straight for the dragon, which was drawing in a deep breath as it rapidly descended.

“Dammit, it’s going to use ‘Dragon Breath’!”

“W-we’re in danger, that we are!”

The Shiga Eight candidates all started running around, too.

However, they scattered in several directions. Jelil, Bauen, Kerun, and most of the others followed Ryuona in running forward, the archer Bauduin stepped back and readied his bow, and the broadsword user and dual-wielder ran off to the side to dodge the attack.

“Sir Bauduin, aim for the tamer!”

“Right!”

While the lesser dragon was distracted, Bauduin’s arrow pierced the forehead of the already unconscious tamer.

“The dragon’s comiiiiing!”

“Put the Magic Furnace on full blast!”

“It already is!”

“Well, turn it up higher! I don’t care if it breaks! Pour everything into that barrier!”

Fearful of the dragon’s deadly breath attack, the royal army headquarters raised the strength of their barrier to the max.

But even a dedicated on-site magic device couldn’t protect the entire encampment.

“Run for iiit!”

“Everyone scatter, now! Or you’ll be swallowed up in the ‘Dragon Breath’!”

The commanders on both flanks frantically moved their troops.

Unfortunately, even the fastest soldiers were still far too slow. Before they could get away, the dragon was upon them, its jaw filling up with scarlet flames.

“W-we’re doooooomed!”

The soldiers kept running to the very last, all too aware that they would never make it.

Above them, a merciless heat began to spread...

“HI-YAAAAAAAAAAAA!! ‘Reverse Death Guillotine’!”

Ryuona the Grass Cutter, sprinting through the air with “Skywalking,” knocked the dragon’s jaw upward with her battle scythe.

GYAAAAOOZZZ.

The flames escaped the dragon’s jaws along with a shriek, scorching the sky above the battlefield.

While the aftereffects set a few people’s hair or clothing on fire, they were

able to put the flames out safely by rolling on the ground, and no one was harmed.

“Tch, not enough—‘Death Guillotine,’ ‘Triple Attack’!”

Ryuona’s mighty swing closed in on the dragon like an oncoming storm, making full use of the weight and centrifugal force of the battle scythe.

“One...”

The scythe swept sideways, closing in on the dragon’s neck.

The dragon parried with its claws, sending red and white sparks flying.

“Twoooo...”

As the battle scythe was knocked back into the air, Ryuona used the momentum to whirl her body around, this time swinging it down from above.

This time, the dragon moved its long neck to dodge the strike.

As Ryuona spun past, the lesser dragon’s fangs closed in on her undefended back.

“Threeeeeee!”

Just before it could close its jaws on her, Ryuona’s scythe swept up.

The blade clashed with the dragon’s fangs, showering even more sparks than before.

A dragon’s fangs are said to be able to pierce anything, but evidently they couldn’t produce enough power in a head-on clash.

The struggle lasted only a moment before the recoil sent Ryuona flying back.

Before her eyes, she saw the dragon’s back as it twisted itself around in midair.

“Look out!”

The dragon shot through the air, its tail aimed straight at Ryuona.

“Tch...!”

She used the scythe as a shield to block the attack, but couldn’t support the full weight in midair when her “Skylrunning” had run out. She was sent crashing

to the ground instantly, making a deep ditch in the earth.

“B-but she’s with the Shiga Eight...”

“Even they can’t stand up to a dragon...?”

The hope that had bloomed in the royal army soldiers’ hearts was plunged into despair at the sight of a Shiga Eight Swordsmen member’s defeat.

“...■ **Lost Air** Kiryuu Shoushitsu!”

“...■ **Fallen Hurricane Hammer** Ochijuu Senzuchi!”

Two voices rang out, and the triumphant dragon suddenly plunged downward.

Still, it maintained a height where not even spears could reach it.

“...■ **Call Thunder** Rakurai!”

“...■ **Down Burst** Kakou Bakuryuu!”

Two more voices echoed on the battlefield.

A thunderbolt struck the dragon, and an explosion of cold air dealt a following blow, finally bringing the lesser dragon down to the earth.

“The Shiga Thirty-Three Staves...what incredible magic, that it is.”

“Don’t just stand there! Now’s our chance for a counterattack!”

“Right!”

At Jelil’s shout, the Shiga Eight candidates gallantly ran forward.

“Windblade” Bauen led the dragon around expertly with his confounding Magic Katana, while “Whitelance” Kerun struck at its other side wherever it let its guard down. The other candidates each found openings to surround the lesser dragon.

“Watch out for its tail and wings, too, not just the claws and fangs!”

The Scarlet Nobleman Jelil, a seasoned leader of the explorer party Red Dragon’s Roar, commanded the other candidates. He, too, put magic power into his Magic Sword Icetree Fang and attacked the lesser dragon in a whirl of freezing fog.

“Such tough defenses...”

“Even the Thirty-Three Staves’ greater magic didn’t put a scratch on it.”

“Do not falter! Its barrier has been worn down a great deal!”

Jelil scolded a comrade who seemed to be having second thoughts.

“Lesser dragon, level 55, with skills like ‘Close Combat’ and ‘Wind Magic.’”

An “Analyze” skill user relayed information to Jelil.

“‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

“‘Windblade Dance’!”

Kerun and Bauen unleashed their special attacks at the same time, but the dragon managed to dodge both with an agility that seemed at odds with its massive size.

Then it flung a boulder that it seemed to have picked up as it dodged.

As the two were still unbalanced from using their attacks, their comrades knocked them out of the boulder’s path by kicking or tackling them to safety.

“Oof...”

“Thank you. Though I wish you’d be a bit gentler next time, that I do.”

“Don’t be careless with your special attacks! The dragon is trying to wear us down!”

Jelil gave a warning as the warriors stood up.

“I’m not sure if it’s wearing us down. It’s more like...”

“It is toying with us, that it is.”

If it had crushed the boulder and thrown a barrage of rocks instead, the two would likely no longer be alive.

“We must keep it busy until Lady Ryuona recovers!”

“Yes, of course.”

Jelil and the others began a hopeless struggle to buy time.



“Gaaaaaaah!”

Struck by the lesser dragon’s tail, the broadsword user went rolling across the ground, coughing up blood. A priest came running to his aid from the rear.

They had been fighting for nearly ten minutes already, yet the dragon was still fighting as ferociously as ever, with only light wounds to show for it.

“Someone close the gap!”

“Sir Kerun was already evacuated earlier, that he was. It is only the two of us who remain now, that it is.”

With one less fighter to get in its way, the dragon began drawing in breath.

“...Not good. <Icetree>!”

Jelil spoke the scripture that invoked the Magic Sword’s power, creating a tree out of ice that blocked the “Dragon Breath.”

“So it can only deflect even a quick ‘Breath’ attack once...”

Just then, the dragon’s head burst through the flames and shards of ice, its huge jaws heading straight for Jelil.

“...<Windblade>!”

Bauen aimed an attack at its eyes, but the barrier stopped it from doing any real damage beyond dazzling the dragon’s eyes for a moment.

However...

“Hi-yaaaaaa!”

In that brief moment, a shadow charged into the fray with “Blink.”

“...‘Guillotine Scythe’!”

The battle scythe’s attack finally shattered the barrier and even smashed one of the now unprotected scales.

GYAAAAOOZZZZ.

The dragon’s roar shook the trees.

A single gash now ran down the side of its face.

“Lady Ryuona!”

“Sorry for the wait!”

Bauen’s smiling form suddenly disappeared from sight.

“What the—?!”

Jelil’s brave fighting ended equally abruptly when the dragon appeared behind him and knocked him away.

“So you’ve been holding back this whole time, huh?”

GYAOOOOOOSZ.

The lesser dragon reared back triumphantly.

Evidently, it had been refraining from using skills like “Blink” and “Stout Legs” in favor of enjoying their battle.

“This doesn’t look good, then. We might not be able to win even if Heim or good old Juleburg were here...”

On top of the large difference in levels, the dragon also had mastery of skills, just like the humans it was fighting.

Most of all, its raw instincts and power were simply out of their league.

“But then again...I couldn’t ask for a better final opponent!”

Ryuona challenged the dragon, fully prepared to die.

She used all of the techniques and experience she’d built up throughout her life, unleashing her signature “Guillotine Strike” alone or in combinations as she fought.

But it still wasn’t enough.

Before she could make a single scratch on the lesser dragon, her armor was broken, and her well-trained muscles were increasingly scraped and bloody.

Covered in blood, she still barely managed to stay alive, thanks to the Support Magic from behind her.

“One last attack. ‘Blink’... ‘Guillotine Scythe’!”

As the dragon drew in breath, Ryuona used the last trick up her sleeve in a

last-ditch effort to take it down with her.

Surrounded by red light, she closed in on the dragon, sending a slash right into its already flaming jaws.

Her skin burned, her flesh charred, yet Ryuona did not stop.

She simply focused all her remaining strength on one last blow, praying that her blade would reach its target.

GYAAAAOOZZZ.

The dragon's scream echoed across the battlefield.

As the cry reached her ears, already barely able to hear, Ryuona let her mind sink into darkness with a final sigh of satisfaction.



"Lady Ryuonaaaaaaa!"

The soldiers and officers of the royal army shouted as they saw Ryuona enveloped in scarlet flames.

"Now's our chance! All units, charge!"

The rebel army flooded forward to attack the shaken royal army.

Then someone running on the front lines noticed something strange.

"...Who the hell's that?!"

A mysterious figure with cursed purple hair was standing beside the charred Ryuona.

"A hero?"

"It's Nanashi the Hero!"

Someone cried out the person's identity.

GYA000000SZ.

The mystery man—Nanashi the Hero—crouched next to Ryuona, as if he couldn't hear the lesser dragon's threatening roar.

GYA000000SZ.

The lesser dragon rose with its jaws wide open, swooping to punish the ignorant fool who dared ignore its presence.

“Sir Hero, look out!”

But in spite of the onlookers’ concerns, the hero sent the dragon flying with nothing but a backhand blow and a muttered “Back off.”

Nanashi the Hero ignored both the giant creature tumbling away in a cloud of dust and the rebel army that had halted its charge in sheer confusion. Instead, he pulled out a glass vial, seemingly from nowhere.

“You’re so reckless.”

He emptied the contents of the vial—an elixir—over Ryuona’s body.

As soon as the glowing blue liquid touched her, magic circles appeared all around her body, moving up and down her frame like a CT scan.

In a matter of moments, the charred skin regenerated and regained a vibrant pinkish color. Even her numerous scars, which had come to be one of her trademarks, vanished without a trace.

Since her clothes and armor had been burned away in the dragon’s breath, all that was left were the burnt remains of her underwear, like little more than charcoal marks.

Nanashi the Hero produced a cloak from thin air and put it over Ryuona.

“Nn...nngh.”

Ryuona groaned, her eyelids fluttering.

“Sir... Hero?”

GYA000000SZ.

The lesser dragon roared.

It had hesitated to attack, even though its enemy’s guard was down, but now it finally gathered its resolve and charged.

In an instant, it was behind Nanashi’s back as if it had teleported there.

Then it used that momentum and centrifugal force for an overpowering

sweep of its tail.

“Sir Hero, behind you!” Ryuona cried.

“It’s fine.”

He raised a hand lightly and stopped the dragon’s tail attack, then even deigned to grab it and fling the enormous lesser dragon away.

“No way...”

The surreal sight stunned Ryuona so much that she didn’t even notice the cloak slipping as she stared in awe.

Nanashi the Hero walked toward the dragon.

While his gait was as casual and unguarded as if he were taking an afternoon stroll, the dragon braced itself warily, watching Nanashi’s every move.

If anyone present were able to read the expression of a dragon, they might even say that there was fear in its eyes.

“...Sir Hero.”

Ryuona gazed wide-eyed at the battle.

Both armies seemed to hold their breath as they waited for it to unfold.

Nanashi the Hero raised his arm lightly.

“Roll over!”

He lowered his arm briskly as he gave the order, and the lesser dragon sprawled out on its back, showing its belly.

Jaws dropped throughout the battlefield as everyone stared.

None of them knew that this was an effect of the Friend of the Black Dragon title.

While all present were still frozen in shock, Nanashi the Hero was the only one who seemed to accept what was happening as perfectly natural. He’d seen the same thing before when he tamed the Evil Dragon family in the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth, after all.

“Hold still for a sec.”

While the dragon made what could only be described as puppy dog eyes at him, the hero pulled the hat off its head.

“Ah, so they were controlling you with screws and Doom Needles...”

He held his hand over the dragon’s head, and the screws disappeared. Then he took out an advanced magic potion and used it to heal the lesser dragon’s wounds. Though it wouldn’t be evident from the outside, the Doom Needles had also vanished from the dragon’s brain.

“There, now you’re free. Don’t bother any humans, okay?”

He gave a shooing gesture, and the lesser dragon took off into the skies.

“I thought heroes weren’t supposed to interfere with wars between humans!”

This cry came from the leader of the rebel army, Duke Vistall’s eldest son, Torriel.

Nanashi the Hero used a visual Unit Deployment to reappear directly in front of the man.

“I actually just stopped by to run an errand. Here, this is from your little sister.”

He handed over the letter from Torriel’s youngest sister, Somienna.

“I’m not sure why you tried to kill your father, but if you keep just trying to take shortcuts in life, you’ll only make the people who care about you sad.”

With that simple word of advice, Nanashi the Hero vanished.

He reappeared in the midst of the Yowork army.

“What do you want, Shiga Kingdom hero?! You going to take us all on alone?!”

The Yowork Kingdom army commander bellowed at him in Shigan language.

“No, that would be too much trouble. Besides...”

Nanashi the Hero waved his hand, and a group of knights clad in shining golden armor appeared around him.

“...I’m not alone.”

On the hero’s signal, the golden-armored knights began knocking Yowork Kingdom soldiers away one after another.

“Children? No, dwarfs and leprechauns?! I can’t believe you have fairies serving you!”

“Nuh-uuuh?”

The golden-armored knight in a pink cloak—Tama—appeared behind the commander and took him down with a backbreaker throw.

“Garage, <Open>!”

A black square seemed to open up in space in front of the knight with lilac hair and a red cape—Arisa.

“All right, everyone! Let’s do it!”

“Yes, sir!”

The golden-armored knight in the yellow cloak—Pochi—grabbed some nearby slave soldiers and started tossing them into the black space.

“Did those Kuvork survivors send you?!”

The commander sat up and bellowed. “Fire Rod soldiers! Burn them, slaves and all!”

On his command, twenty soldiers promptly started shooting balls of flame out of their Fire Rods.

“I won’t let you harm them, I declare.”

A golden-armored knight in a white cloak—Nana—stood in front of the slave soldiers and raised her large shield to protect them.

“You think you can stop all of us with a single shield?!”

“Not a problem, I declare.”

Seven transparent Flexible Shields appeared around her, moving on their own to deflect the fireballs.

“Keep firing! You, too, mages! Hit them with every attack spell you’ve got!”

As the commander practically screeched orders, the Fire Rod users kept shooting until they ran out of magic, while the mages piled on spells like Fire Ball, Fire Storm, Blade Storm, Toss Stone, and so on.

It looked like an excessive amount of attacks to take down a single person, and yet...

“Impossible...!”

A multitude of more barriers had appeared in front of Nana, protecting her and the slaves sheltered behind her from the fearsome onslaught of spells.

Fortress.

It was created with battles against floormasters and greater demons in mind.

Naturally, it could easily deflect the magic of some local army mages.

“Mas...Sir Hero, we’ve collected all of them.”

“Got it.”

Once all the Kuvorkian slave soldiers had been retrieved, the black space vanished.

“Sorry to bother you!”

Arisa’s cheerful exclamation sounded out of place on the battlefield as the hero’s group disappeared without a sound, just as abruptly as they’d arrived.

“Unbelievable...”

In the rebel army headquarters, Torriel murmured quietly to himself.

“So that’s this generation’s new hero... He tamed a powerful dragon without fighting it, stopped by in the middle of an army of ten thousand like he was going for a stroll in an empty field, and achieved his goals without a single life lost. With his help, perhaps the Shiga Kingdom can even overcome the Age of Uprising...”

“Lord Torriel!”

An aide called out to him, and he remembered that he couldn’t turn back now.

“Yes, I know. We cannot change our course now, especially out of respect for those we have lost along the way. All that remains is to settle things with my father once and for all.”

Torriel gave the order to resume the battle, then returned to the now-empty tent.

“For the sake of our people, this cannot go on much longer.”

Torriel grasped the hilt of his dagger, emblazoned with his family seal.

As he did so, he saw a letter fall to the floor.

“...Somienna.”

Torriel looked over the letter from his little sister.

“Perhaps I went about this all wrong...”

As he read the letter that pleaded for him to live, Torriel’s eyes filled with tears.

By evening, the rebellion came to an end, and Torriel was captured by Shiga Eight candidate Jelil and brought before Duke Vistall.

The words they exchanged are not recorded in any known history.

However, they surely must have discussed something that did not develop during the mire of the civil war, as all the fighting came to an end with this engagement.

Thus, Duke Vistall took back ownership of the duchy, and the people could return to their everyday lives.

While Torriel went on trial in the royal capital, he was not executed; instead, he was sentenced to live out the rest of his days under house arrest in a remote area of the duchy.

While some nobles denounced this as too soft a sentence, most relented when they heard that it was Nanashi the Hero, a key figure in the defeat of the rebel army, who asked that his life be spared.

And so, the rebellion that began in Vistall Duchy with the assassination attempt against the duke near the year’s end finally came to a close.

Epilogue

Satou here. It takes courage to attempt something you've never done before. Everyone is afraid of failure, but I think you have to overcome that fear and take the first step if you want to have any hope of grasping success.

"Brother Eruus."

"Arisa!"

I went with Arisa and Lulu to visit Eruus in the viceroy's manor in Kuvork City.

"So it really was you."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Eruus looked at Arisa with increasing certainty, while Arisa played innocent.

"Last night, father visited me in my dreams. He told me that you freed him and the rest of our family who were imprisoned in the labyrinth."

I was glad to hear that King Kuvork's ghost granted Arisa's request.

"Gotcha. I'm glad you were able to see him."

"All thanks to you, Arisa. You helped us take back the capital from the shadows, too, didn't you? You even got the hero's attendants to help by freeing the knights and mages who were experimented on in the labyrinth. And they freed several hundred soldiers who were being enslaved and abused by Yowork Kingdom, too."

"All I did was ask for help. If you want to thank anyone, thank the hero."

"Well, I still want to thank you anyway. Thanks, Arisa."

Eruus clasped Arisa's hands in his.

Maybe now is a good time?

I looked at Arisa and nodded, and she turned back to Eruus. “Brother, let’s get to the main reason we came here today.”

“The main reason?”

“Yes, it’s an important step for you to become king.”

Arisa called me over.

“I’m going to free all of you from the Geist that commands you to be slaves until you die.”

“You can do that?!”

I unraveled the cloth that was wrapped around the staff in my hands.

“Yes, apparently the imperial mage Orchidee’s Geist spell is sealed inside this staff.”

“You can use Geist with that staff? And even if that’s true, how would that help you set us free from the Geists we’re already under?”

“It said in Orchidee’s research journals that if someone is given conflicting orders under a Geist, the stronger one will overrule, and the weaker one will disappear. We’re going to use that now. The Orchidee who was scheming in the labyrinth must be stronger than he was when he cast a Geist on all of you.”

Besides, since I was the one using the staff, my newly maxed-out “Geist” skill should be able to make things work.

We wouldn’t have to use this roundabout method if I could use chants, but we couldn’t exactly have Eruus wait around to be enthroned until I master the art of magical singing.

“Line up over there, please.”

“Brother, Lulu, come with me.”

Arisa linked arms with Eruus and Lulu.

“Here we go. *You may stop being slaves whenever you wish...*”

First, I stated the conditions for the new Geist.

“<Let the twilight dawn.>”

Next, I spoke the activation phrase for the Xanthic Staff.

The Geist charged within the staff activated, and an invisible wave enveloped Eruus, Arisa, and Lulu.

In the back of my mind, I felt something snap. My own “Geist” skill told me that this was evidence of Orchidee’s Geist being broken.

“There, it’s done.”

“T-truly?”

“Yes, just like that. Also, I have a message for you from Lord Kuro, Prince Eruus.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve taken back the City Core room beneath the royal castle. It’s now sealed with a barrier that only the prince can cross. Go and inherit rulership whenever you wish.”

I’d already recharged the City Core with plenty of magic power so that he wouldn’t wind up being unable to do anything after becoming king.

“Oh, and take this.”

“The diadem of Kuvork Kingdom?”

“Yes. It’s a replica, though we remade it as closely as possible. It’s a congratulatory gift from Arisa and Lulu.”

I made this crown out of ingots based on the one the ghost of the king was wearing.

It might have slightly different gems inset than the original, but give me a break—I really splurged on the overall quality.

“And these are from me.”

I handed him a letter and several keys.

The keys were to the storehouses I created in an empty lot near the outer walls of Kuvork City using the “Create House” skill.

“What are they?”

“There are supplies and funds in these storehouses. Please use them to rebuild your kingdom.”

I’d also included at least five years’ worth of preserved foods, enough to last an extra year or two if need be, to make sure Eruus’s kingdom management wouldn’t be on hard mode.

“Your Highness! Come quickly! The castle!”

I heard the elderly consul come running from the hallway.

Before I came here, I used Earth Magic to do some emergency repairs to the castle. He was probably coming to report about that.

I also created eight large golems around level 40 to be used to defend the nation as needed.

However, there weren’t any signs of Yowork Kingdom striking back anytime soon.

The lesser dragon I freed had attacked Yowork Castle and went on a rampage against the army and the golems.

The king was in a state of shock over these events, and now the cheating knights’ captain and the queen were teaming up to support the king’s sons taking over, engaging in a family feud against the king’s side, which was led by the witch Myude—the Psychic Magic user sent by the Phantom Peach Orchard organization.

Their forces were fairly equally matched, and I’d sneakily exposed Myude’s Psychic Magic a while back, which should keep things balanced. The internal turmoil in Yowork Kingdom was likely to continue for a while yet.

On top of that, I’d also laid waste to any roads where Yowork Kingdom might send troops this way with all kinds of Earth Magic and attack spells, so they shouldn’t be attacking for a few years yet, even if things did settle down there.

“We’ll be heading out now, big brother.”

“What?! You’re not going to stay and rebuild the kingdom with me?!”

“I can’t. If I’m here, the nation will be divided in two. But don’t worry, I’ll lend you a hand anytime you’re in trouble.”

Arisa gave him the address of our mansion in Labyrinth City.

Just to be safe, I also gave Eruus a Space Magic–based emergency contact device.

“There you are, Your Highness!”

Just before the elderly consul came in, we put on our transparency cloaks.

“Old man! Talk some sense into Arisa, would you?”

“Lady Arisa? Why, was she here?”

“...Huh? Where’d she go?”

I scooped up Arisa and Lulu and used “Skyrunning” to leave out the window, without a sound.

“Arisa...”

For some reason, even though he shouldn’t be able to see us, Eruus happened to be looking right in Arisa’s direction.

“I’ll be a good king, I promise. And I’ll make our nation even better than the old Kuvork Kingdom! So please come back someday, Arisa. This place will always be your homeland.”

As I held Arisa close, tears dripped onto my sleeve.

“...Okay, big brother. I promise I’ll come visit with lots of new stories to tell.”

With that whisper, Arisa wiped away her tears.

“Let’s go, Master.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. It’s Eruus’s turn now.”

Arisa smiled at me, beaming as bright as the sun.

I used Unit Deployment to take us back to the rest of the group.



“Can we stop by the grave one last time before we go?”

At Arisa’s request, we returned to the royal family’s grave behind the castle.

“...I brought your favorite, Nisnarch.”

Arisa offered a cup of mead at the grave.

“Foggg?”

“That’s weird. It was clear just a minute ago, sir.”

As Tama and Pochi pointed out, there was suddenly so much fog that we could barely see the castle.

“It might be the work of an attacker. Stay vigilant.”

At Liza’s warning, everyone looked around the area sharply.

“Arisa, a person has appeared, I report.”

“Miasma.”

Nana and Mia pointed at one part of the fog.

“It’s Nisnarch,” Lulu whispered.

The traitorous vassal Nisnarch emerged from the fog.

“We broke the Dungeon Core and freed Father and the others.”

“...Thank you, Lady Arisa.”

Nisnarch bowed his head deeply.

“And Eruus chased out the Yowork people, and reestablished Kuvork Kingdom.”

As Arisa spoke, pure magic shone out of the castle.

“You can tell what that means, right? Eruus has taken control of the City Core and inherited kingship.”

“Lord Eruus...I could hardly have dreamed of such a happy outcome. Thank you so much, Lady Arisa.”

Tears streamed down Nisnarch’s face as he held back an expression of joy.

“Now I can spend eternity here, wandering the world as a sinner until the world ends, without regrets.”

“I swear. You’ve always been so stubborn about the strangest things, even

though you act like you don't care about anything." Arisa sighed. "Sorry, but I'm not nice enough to go along with your whole tortured ghost act."

"Lady Arisa...?"

"Pass on already, Nisnarch. I forgive your crimes."

"But...what I've done can never be atoned for..."

"Oh, be quiet! I told you I'm forgiving you, and that's that! Since you're my retainer, just bow your head and accept it, got that?"

"...Very well."

Nisnarch bowed before Arisa, accepting her awkward act of kindness.

When Arisa held out her hand and said "Master?" I gave her the Holy Stone, without a word.

A spire of blue light rose from the Holy Stone and enveloped Nisnarch.

"Your sins have been forgiven. So once you pass on to the other side, you'd better start fresh and serve Father and the others again."

Nisnarch's spirit rose and began to fade among the particles of light floating in the air.

He gave one last slight smile before he disappeared.

"Farewell, Nisnarch. My faithful friend..."

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on Arisa's whispered words, but I pretended not to hear anything and watched in respectful silence with the others as the light drifted up into the sky.



"Lady Arisa, ya gotta let us come with ya."

Just before we left Kuvork Kingdom, Arisa arranged a secret meeting with Ben and his family.

"Please, Ben. Do me a favor and support Eruus however you can. You're needed here the most, where you can be of real help rebuilding the kingdom."

"But..."

“Ben, Arisa’s asking us a favor.”

One of Ben’s cousins scolded him as he tried to protest.

“Besides, Lady Arisa ain’t gonna abandon us forever, you know that.”

Ben looked at Arisa beseechingly.

“He’s right, of course. I’ll come back and visit once Eruus’s rule is a bit more established. Now, would you mind if I asked you for some help if anything comes up?”



“Don’t be such a stranger, Lady Arisa.”

“Uh-huh! If yer ever in trouble, we’ll come runnin’ even if yer on the tippy-toppiest peak of the Fujisan Mountains!”

Ben and his family seemed exceedingly attached to Arisa.

“What about you, Ben? Will you help Eruus rebuild the kingdom for me?”

“Oh, all right. You know I cain’t turn down a favor for you, Lady Arisa.”

I wonder what kinds of favors Arisa asked for when she was a princess.

Maybe I’ll ask Lulu about it sometime.

“All right, then, we’re off. I’ll send you some letters from the road, so feel free to write back if you’re so inclined.”

“Course we will! We’ll be waitin’.”

Ben and his family saw us off as we left Kuvork City.

They kept waving until we were out of sight, and Arisa and Lulu kept on waving back.

Despite this parting with her loyal vassals, there were no tears in Arisa’s eyes.

“I can see them all again anytime, after all.”

With that, Arisa turned back toward the road.

“All right! Let’s head for our next destination!”

“Aye-aye siiir?”

“Pochi wants a place with yummy meat, sir!”

“Mr. Mushrooms.”

At Arisa’s cheerful signal, the rest of the group started making enthusiastic suggestions for our next stop.

I flipped through the sightseeing materials I got from the prime minister.

The small central nations, which included Kuvork Kingdom, had no shortage of spots that were famous for furniture, rock formations, and all kinds of other tourist attractions. It’d also be fun to go see some cheesemaking in Nolork

Kingdom, the home of one of our friends from Labyrinth City, Princess Meetia.

Once we did a lap around the central nations, we could either make west toward places like Parion Province and the Garleon Alliance; south to the sandy Sania Kingdom and the coastal home of the leprechauns, Blybrogha Kingdom; east to the minor eastern nations and Makiwa Kingdom; or it could be fun to check out Siruga Kingdom, home to the dragon worshippers.

Of course, stopping by the Saga Empire in the northern part of the continent was a must. I would like to look into Hero Summoning circles and find out if there's a way to get back to my old world, even if I don't really want to return for a while yet.

Oh, I know.

On my journey, I should try gathering information about turning the "chimera-fied" people back to normal, too.

Though the likelihood was low, they played a major part in helping Eruus take back the kingdom. They ought to be rewarded with hope for a peaceful future as humans, I think.

Since there were so many places we wanted to go, we had a hard time deciding on our next destination. Even after we ate lunch, we still hadn't made a final decision.

In fact, maybe we should even travel from Seiryuu County to Ougoch Duchy again, saying hello to all our old friends before we leave for a long trip.

As I thought about this, I saw the beastfolk girls chattering happily out of the corner of my eye.

Come to think of it, Liza's hometown was destroyed by the Weaselman Empire and her tribe scattered. Maybe we should gather up all the survivors and other slaves and help them all migrate to Muno County, where there was very little discrimination against demi-humans.

"Li..."

Just as I started to call out to Liza, my vision suddenly went black and white.

"What in the world?"

I couldn't hear anything. Or smell.

Warily, I peered around.

At some point, the map name in my AR display had changed to "no map available."

"Hero."

A young voice spoke from behind me.

"Y-you..."

When I turned around, I saw the mysterious young girl who had once waved to me from a painting and had appeared when I fought the Dogheaded Demon Lord.

No, wait. Although her appearance was the same, she seemed weakened, her presence fainter than before.

"Go to Parion Province."

Shaking out her hair, a pale blue that was almost aqua, the mysterious young girl spoke.

"Save the hero of this age."

With that, she dissipated into particles of blue light and vanished.

Moments later, my monochrome vision regained its color, and the sounds and smells returned.

"Everyone, I know where we're going next."

Whatever the mysterious girl's motives might be, if Hayato the Hero needed help, I wasn't going to refuse.

You've got to be there for a friend who's in trouble.

"Really? Where?" Arisa asked on behalf of the rest of the group.

My answer was loud and clear.

"Parion Province. Hayato the Hero and his party are there."

EX: Karina and Zena's Big Adventure

"Is there really a village in such a strange place? I inquire."

"It appears more like a beehive than a village, I report."

"Yeah, I know. But there's totally a village just across that rope bridge."

Nana's sisters, along with Miss Karina of Muno County and her maids, had just reached the large cavern that contained the labyrinth village. Erina was the one to answer their doubtful observations.

"You explorers? There's a water restriction right now, so you won't be able to stock up on water."

The men standing watch at the rope bridge were quick to supply this information.

"We are only here to deliver supplies at the request of the guild. Once we have handed over the goods, we will leave immediately, so we have no need for water."

The eldest sister, Adin, spoke up on behalf of the group.

"Supplies, huh? That's good to hear. If you could show us the tally sheet for the delivery, we can let you into the village without paying the fee."

"Lady Karina."

"Right, Mr. Raka... Will this do?"

At the prompting of her Intelligent Artifact Raka, Karina produced the tally sheet from her breast pocket. While the man was clearly distracted by her beauty, he still made sure to check the tally sheet thoroughly before permitting them to enter.

"There really is a village in the labyrinth, I exclaim."

"Tria too! Tria is surprised, too!"

Karina and her company watched with a smile while Nana's sisters exclaimed.

They probably reacted very similarly the first time they came here.

"The people in the village seem kinda on edge."

"Maybe it's because of the water restriction the guard mentioned?"

Erina and her newbie colleague whispered about the atmosphere, which did seem different than usual.

Fortunately, they didn't encounter any particular issues with getting lost or hit on, and made it to their destination at the center of the village.

"Over there! There is a crowd there, I report."

A throng of people was gathered outside a residence.

There was a clamor of loud voices angrily arguing about something.

"Alert! Tria has spotted Zena!"

The third sister was correct: The magic soldier Zena of the Seiryuu County Labyrinth Elite was right in the center of the ring of arguing people.

Her bodyguards and best friends—Lilio the scout, Iona the beautiful broadsword wielder, and Lou the shieldmaiden—were all with her as well.

"It looks like Zena is in trouble, I declare," said Seis, the sixth sister.

"Wait here, everyone. I will go find out what is happening."

Adin waded into the crowd.

"Excuse me, please let me through."

"Huh? Don't butt your head into our—hey, it's the Shield Princess!"

A villager moved to stop Adin from interfering, then exclaimed when he saw her face.

"The Shield Princess! Is the young master with her, then?"

"If the young master's here, little miss elf should be here, too, right? Maybe she can figure out why the village water source has dried up!"

"Shield Princess! Where's the young master? We wanna ask his elf friend a

favor.”

The villagers eagerly closed in around Adin.

“...Shield Princess?”

“C’mon, please! Our water source is running dry!”

All of them kept pleading to Adin, ignoring her confusion.

“I won’t allow rudeness toward Adin, I declare.”

“Tria is angry, too!”

The sisters stepped in between Adin and the crowd of villagers.

“Th-there’s more Shield Princesses?!”

“They all look the same!”

“How many of her are there?”

“Please slow down, everyone. They aren’t Miss Nana, the Shield Princess. They’re her sisters.”

Zena explained the truth to the alarmed villagers.

“Huh? Not the Shield Princess? But they look just like her.”

“I am Huit, I announce.”

“Yes! Tria is Tria!”

After the most emphatically self-asserting duo, the rest of the sisters each introduced themselves, and the village chief introduced himself in turn.

Karina attempted to introduce herself as well, but the village chief changed the subject without even noticing her.

“So, where is the young master?”

“Young master...?”

“Master Pendragon isn’t with you?”

The village chief was asking about Satou.

“Master is not here, I declare.”

“He is traveling around the continent with Nana, I report.”

“H-he’s not here? Then the elf princess...”

“Mia is with them as well, I declare.”

“Well, shoot...”

“Chief, even without the young master or the little elf lass, look at all of these Shield Princesses. If we send this nice young mage lady with them, maybe they can investigate the dried-up water source for us?”

One of the more influential villagers offered a solution to the disappointed village chief.

“What do you think, missy? Maybe you could make it if these ladies come with you?”

“Er...”

Zena hesitated.

“Hey, are you guys as strong as Nana or what?”

“No, Lilio. At our current strength, we would not be able to defeat Nana even if we took her on all at once, I declare. At best, we can only defeat a war mantis, I assess.”

Seis responded to Lilio’s question.

“War mantises? How strong are those?”

“About as strong as Sir Dozon and his crew.”

“Damn! That’s plenty strong enough, then!”

The villagers looked to the girls with hope in their eyes.

“Please allow me to make a formal request. We’d like you to investigate the cause of the village’s water source drying up. The deadline is about a half moon, when our water stores run out. Your reward would be thirty gold coins, and you’d all get a lifetime of free water supply and lodging in the village. How’s that sound?”

The village chief looked to Zena and Adin.

Zena remained silent, her expression still troubled. She herself wanted to help, but she couldn't just take requests as she pleased, since she was staying in Labyrinth City on military business.

"Lady Karina, what should we do?"

"Oh, we simply must do it! As a noble and future leader, I cannot turn my back on people in need, I say!" Karina's response was immediate. "Do come with us, Zena! Your Wind Magic would be ever so helpful!"

Karina reached out her hand to Zena.

Zena started to react in kind, then thought of her duties again and hesitated.

"Miss Zena, we are still on leave for three more days."

"She's right, Zena."

"Let's do it, Zenacchi."

"Right!"

At her comrades' encouragement, Zena agreed to the request.

Thus, Karina's company, Nana's sisters, and Zena's squad formed a temporary party.



"It is damp and slippery, I declare."

"They said it only completely dried up two days ago."

As Huit complained, Zena shared some information.

The young women were at the bottom of the deep abyss that surrounded the labyrinth village, making their way up the dried-up waterway that connected to the dried-up bog.

Of course, the waterway itself wasn't large enough to walk through, so Zena used her Wind Magic to investigate and found another route to take them to the source.

"Wait a minute. I hear water."

"Yes! Tria hears it, too!"

Lilio and Tria both pressed their ears to the ground, unconcerned with the mud that stuck to their hair and faces.

“Let us follow the sound, then!”

“Yes, Lady Karina.”

The two scouts went on ahead, with Karina and Zena following.

It was difficult to walk, due to all the rocks and stones underfoot.

“The rocks seem rather fragile around here.”

“Yes, beware of falling rocks from the ceiling,” Raka warned.

“The floor here looks worm-eaten, I report.”

“The wall, too, I declare.”

Within the brittle bedrock, there was a multitude of holes.

“Depth is unclear, I report.”

The curious Huit dropped a pebble into the hole, but the sound of it hitting the bottom never came.

Even when they cast Mana Light on a stone and dropped it in, they still couldn’t see the bottom.

“Zena, perhaps you could determine its depth with Wind Magic?” Karina inquired, as she peered into a hole.

“I hear a sound, I report. Lilio, do you know what it is?”

“A sound...?”

Lilio listened closely and heard quiet cracking.

“Uh-oh! Zenacchi, Miss Noble, get back!”

Realizing what it was, she cried out a warning.

But it seemed it was a moment too late.

The floor crumbled beneath Karina’s feet.

“Eeeeeeeek!”

“Lady Karina!”

Zena's and Karina's guardian maids looked into the hole.

But unlike the maids, who stayed on firm ground, Zena threw herself into the dark hole after Karina without hesitation.

"Zenacchi!" "Miss Zena!" "Zena!"

Her squad rushed over to look into the hole, only to find that Zena had already disappeared into the darkness.

Iona and Lou had to hold Lilio back by the hair to stop her from jumping in after her.

"...■■■■"

Zena squinted into the darkness as the air flew past her.

As she curled up to avoid air resistance while she fell, Zena's eyes spotted the blue light of Raka activating.

Once she caught up to Karina, Zena latched onto her and spoke the invocation word for the Resist Fall spell.

Their falling speed slowed abruptly, and they dropped more slowly through the ten-foot-around vertical cave.

Soon, the faintly lit bottom came into view.

"I can't slow us down all the way!"

Unfortunately, Resist Fall wasn't strong enough to cancel out their momentum completely.

"Mr. Raka!"

"Indeed."

Karina quickly steeled her resolve and gave Raka the signal.

Raka's barrier wrapped around the both of them, producing white scales that protected them just before they reached the bottom.

When they made impact, a column of water sprayed into the air. Luckily, there was enough water at the bottom to break their fall.

The pair came up to the water's surface, crawling onto the shore by the dim

light of glowing moss.

Karina let out a cute little “*Achoo!*” drawing a concerned look from Zena.

“Are you okay, Lady Karina?”

“Yes, I’m quite all right.”

“*Lady Karina, you should use the brazier Sir Satou gave you to warm up.*”

Following Raka’s suggestion, Karina brought out a heat-producing Magic Item that resembled a small charcoal grill, providing warmth for herself and Zena.

“This is nice and warm.”

“Oh, yes. I shall have to thank Satou when he returns.”

The pair half closed their eyes as they enjoyed the pleasant warmth.

“So Lady Karina...did you meet Sir Satou in Muno City?”

“No, we first met when I was lost in the woods of Muno and he came to my rescue.”

“In the woods?”

“Yes, I had set out on a journey to the giants’ village to ask for aid in stopping a demon that was plotting to take over our land.”

Karina went on to explain how Satou helped mediate for her and got help from the giants despite their dislike of Marquis Muno’s family line.

“Satou has come to my aid countless times now. Why, we even fought together against a swarm of goblins attacking the castle gates.”

“That’s very romantic.”

“...Quite so.”

Raka wasn’t quite sure what was romantic about that scenario. Still, he remained silent rather than object to the young ladies’ reminiscing.

“And where did you meet Satou, Zena?”

“He rescued me from a dangerous fall after a wyvern sent me flying.”

“So Satou rescued you, too. We have a lot in common, I say.”

“Yes, we do.”

Zena and Karina smiled at each other.

“I believe Liza mentioned that you saved them t—”

Karina was interrupted by the sound of whistling wind, and looked up just in time to see an enormous splash.

“It appears that a rope fell down here.”

“Perhaps it was Lilio and the others?”

“Judging by the way it fell, perhaps they dropped it by mistake.”

The rope sank for a while, then resurfaced at the other end of the cavern.

“Let’s try and retrieve it! We might be able to use it to get back up.”

“Not to worry. I’ll fetch it at once.”

Karina stopped Zena from jumping into the water, and instead skipped across the surface to pick up the rope.

“You can walk on water, Lady Karina?”

“I learned the trick of it while catching dragonfish.”

Karina demonstrated that she could walk in the air, too.

“Would you be able to get back up that way?”

“Impossible. We haven’t enough mana.”

“What if we combined it with Zena’s magic as well?”

“It might be enough, I suppose...”

“We can do it! We’ll just take breaks on the way up!”

With Zena’s enthusiastic encouragement, Karina kicked off the wall and made it to a foothold a few dozen feet up with the help of Zena’s Wind Magic, then lowered the rope so that Zena could climb up, too.

Soon they were out of range of the glowing moss. Luckily, they had glowing hair bands from Satou to light the way.

“We’re quite fortunate to have Magic Items for illumination.”

“Yes, and the Pure-Water Bag to quench our thirst. We’ll have to find a way to thank Mr. Satou.”

“Agreed. Perhaps we can look for something he’d like together?”

“Yes, let’s!”

The pair fended off the fear of climbing in the dark by chatting about their shared crush.

“Let’s move on to the next, shall we?”

Shouldering the rope, Karina hopped from foothold to foothold.

They repeated this cycle until they ran out of magic and were forced to take a break some 650 feet up.

“Looks like there are some flying monsters up here.”

“It appears their nest is over there.”

“Shan’t we simply defeat them? They hardly look very strong to me.”

“There’s a lot of them, though. And I’d be worried about losing our balance.”

“I concur with Lady Zena. Perhaps it would be best to investigate the tunnel we passed not long ago.”

The pair took Raka’s suggestion and moved into the tunnel.

“...■■■ **Air Hammer** Kizuchi!”

“Hi-ya! Hah!”

There were monsters in the tunnel, too, but Zena’s Wind Magic and Karina’s martial arts made quick work of them.

“There’s a fork here.”

“This one is marked. It must be the one we went through before.”

“Indeed, the path on the right is unexplored. It would be best to investigate that one next.”

“All right. It’s a great help to have you remember our path, Mr. Raka.”

“You’ve helped quite a bit by leaving marks and leading the way, Zena. Oh, I

feel ever so useless...”

“You always take charge of defeating the monsters, Lady Karina. And you’re investigating each path without ever tiring.”

“Quite so. Each of you is using your respective strengths to the fullest.”

With encouragement from Zena and Raka, Karina kept pressing onward in hopes of reuniting with their friends.



“Wait a minute, please.”

There was an enormous mole-like monster in the cave up ahead. It appeared to be sleeping.

Since the passage they were in connected to the cave partway up its wall, they were positioned above the monster, looking down.

“It’s really quite large, isn’t it?”

“I do not think it is an areamaster or its spawn, but I estimate it is at least as strong as a war mantis.”

“Do you think your magic could defeat it, Zena?”

“I don’t think so... My strongest spell is Blade Storm, which I just learned recently, and I don’t think even that could cut through its hide. It would probably be impossible to land a fatal blow unless I could cast the spell directly into its mouth. What about you, Lady Karina?”

“I feel much the same. I imagine I could fight it well enough with Mr. Raka’s protection, but I doubt I’d be able to mortally wound the beastly thing.”

Although both of them had leveled up significantly in the boot camp Satou organized, fighting a monster of this class would still be a life-threatening endeavor.

“Is there any way we can detour around it, Mr. Raka?”

“I’m afraid not. Our only option is to return to the cavern through which we first fell, or...”

“Sneak past that sleeping mole creature, right?”

“I should hate to turn back after coming all this way.”

“All right. I’ll use my Wind Magic to silence our footsteps, then.

Zena cast the same silencing spell she used for harvesting mandrakes, and the pair of them crept along the cavern wall.

Fortunately, the mole seemed to be sleeping very deeply.

As she peered down at it, the foothold Karina was standing on began to crumble.

“Eek!”

Karina turned pale and nearly lost her balance, until Zena’s hand shot out and caught her.

“Phew.”

“Thank y—watch out!”

They had barely breathed a sigh of relief when a rock fell from the ceiling toward Zena’s head.

Karina quickly put up a barrier and protected her.

“Ah...!”

The rock bounced off the barrier and dropped past both their eyes.

Zena quickly jumped to catch it, nearly falling from the passage. This time, Karina was the one to catch her.

“Goodness, what a fright.”

“That was a close one.”

The two of them sank instinctively to a seat on the narrow passage, exchanging a smile.

Then, just outside their line of sight, the wall on the opposite side of the cavern crumbled, and caved in directly on top of the mole.

ZMMMMMMMOGYU.

Awoken from its pleasant slumber, the mole monster—called a yellow mole—let out a roar of rage.

Zena and Karina immediately ducked, but the mole's eyes swiftly fixed on them.

"It spotted us."

"Then we must make the first move!"

With Raka enhancing her strength, Karina ran along the wall far faster than any human should be able to move, launching a flurry of blows at the mole.

The mole went on the defensive, evidently surprised that its target had attacked first.

Its claws slashed back in a frantic counterattack, which Karina dodged with a midair sidestep, positioning herself just below the giant monster's chin.

"Karinaaaa... Uppercuuuuuuut!"

Karina's fist went right through the monster's defenseless chin. She must have picked up the idea of naming her attacks from either Arisa or Pochi.

The mole reeled back and hit the ground with a resounding quake; possibly the punch had shaken its brain.

"Why, I've done it!"

"Not yet, Lady Karina!"

The mole jumped back up and swiftly sent its tail flying toward Karina.

"Air Cushion!"

Zena's spell, which she'd been saving to activate, protected Karina from the tail attack.

However, it couldn't completely block the claw attack that followed when the mole quickly whirled its body around.

"Eeeeeeeek!"

Raka's protection kept Karina from taking any serious damage, but it still sent her flying into the wall within the protective barrier.

The fragile surface collapsed from the force of the impact, and a rain of falling rocks buried Karina, barrier and all.

The mole stomped forward to deal the finishing blow.

“Over here!”

Zena scorched the mole’s back with the Fire Rod she carried on her belt.

The monster stopped and glared down at Zena as if she were an insect.

It galumphed over to Zena at a speed far higher than it had demonstrated mere moments ago, swinging its claws down at her.

“..... ***Air Thrust funshafuu!***”

Zena used Wind Magic to accelerate out of the way of the mole’s claws.

Since she’d never used this technique in actual combat before, she fumbled the landing and went tumbling across the ground before skidding to a halt.

As Zena stood, her vision filled with the jaws of the mole about to close over her.

She quickly jumped out of the way, avoiding the bite by a hair’s breadth, but her cloak got caught between the mole’s fangs and the floor.

“I-it’s stuck!”

The mole raised a short paw to crush Zena underfoot.

As Zena reached for the clasp of her cloak, it seemed she would surely be too late.

“Karinaaaaa... Kiiiiiiiick!”

Karina jumped in to her rescue.

The powerful kick cracked the undefended side of the mole’s head, causing its claws to miss their mark.

“..... ***Entangle Air Kara Kiryuu!***”

With her cloak freed, Zena quickly finished a chant and blocked the mole’s leg with Wind Magic before it could strike Karina.

But it wasn’t quite strong enough to stop the enormous monster’s movement.

At most, it only knocked the creature slightly off-balance.

“■■■■.....”

Karina dodged and weaved, waiting for an opening to strike back, while Zena began chanting her strongest Wind Magic spell in order to create one.

“.....■■ **Blade Storm** Yaiba Arashi!”

A windy vortex of invisible blades struck the mole.

There was a spray of blood, and the mole howled. But...

“...It’s not working!”

While they did deal damage, the blades only cut away fur and left shallow gashes in the hide and fat layer. Its flesh and bones were completely unharmed.

“Submission, I say!”

Karina aimed a body slam at one of its joints, but a sweep of its tail knocked her away in midair.

Since even a clean hit from her fists or feet didn’t do enough damage, this must have been her last resort.

Though the pair continued working together to fight the massive mole with their magic and martial arts, none of their efforts amounted to more than a minimal amount of damage.

Soon, they were backed into a crevice in one corner of the mole’s cave.

Fortunately, the mole couldn’t fit into it, nor could its short arms reach inside.

Zena and Karina downed magic potions to heal their injuries and recover their spent magic.

“Mr. Raka, do you have any ideas?”

“Neither your martial arts nor Lady Zena’s magic can do much harm to the creature. Even if we found a way to deal a small amount of damage, its healing skills would allow it to recover faster than the damage can accumulate. Thus, the ideal strategy would be to retreat. However...”

“I don’t think we can get away.”

“Indeed, the creature is very shrewd for its size. It has already blocked off the

path through which we came, and the other exit is half-buried. It would inevitably catch up before we could break through.”

“Why, we needn’t run away anyway. We simply must defeat the hideous thing.”

Zena giggled. “You never cease to amaze, Lady Karina.”

“The only true defeat is giving up—at least, that’s what a wise friend once told me.”

Karina’s words comforted Zena, too.

It was somewhat ironic, given that those words were originally used to motivate Karina when she was about to give up on her feelings for Satou.

The two of them set about reconsidering a strategy to defeat the mole. Their only option, it seemed, was to force the monster’s mouth open and send Zena’s Blade Storm spell inside.

However, that would be near impossible without several consecutive strokes of luck. As a backup plan, they resolved to try to tough it out until their friends arrived to help them, and to run away immediately if they got the opportunity.

“If only Satou were here...”

“It’ll be fine! My squad, Hachiko, and the others are bound to find us! Let’s just keep fighting back until help arrives!”

“But of course! I’m quite sure my maids will be here soon, too!”

Zena and Karina locked eyes and nodded.

Then the mole’s claws tore the fissure open, as if in mockery of the light that had just returned to the young women’s eyes.

“..... **Air Hammer** Kizuchi!”

Zena’s spell struck it on the nose, and the pair darted beneath it while it howled.

“‘Achilles Hunter,’ I say!”

Like rubbing salt in the wound, Karina dealt a spinning kick to the mole’s eye.

ZMMMMMMOGYU.

With another bellow of pain, the mole lashed out with its tail, which happened by a stroke of bad luck to catch both girls and send them flying in a tangle.

“Eek!”

“Whaaaah!”

Raka’s protection saved them just in time, though it wasn’t enough to prevent the momentum that kept them tumbling across the ground.

As they rolled, a shadow passed overhead.

The mole had leaped into the air, about to land on them both with its massive body.

Karina probably could have escaped on her own. Instead, she chose to protect Zena with her magic barrier. There was grim determination in her eyes, as if she knew perfectly well that they might be crushed to death even if they survived the initial impact.

“‘Javelin’!”

Several familiar voices rang out at once, and a barrage of see-through spears assailed the mole’s body.

Karina held tight to Zena and rolled out of the way just in time, the mole landing directly behind them.

“Zenacchiiiiii!” “Miss Zena!” “Zena!”

“Lady Karinaaaaaa!” “Karina!”

Behind the mole, Iona and the two guardian maids charged with their swords.

The mole yowled as more attacks pummeled into it all at once. When it tried to stand, another volley of “Javelins” rained down and pinned it to the ground.

“Now’s our only chance!”

Karina leaped right into the mole’s wide-open mouth, holding it open with all her might.

“Zena!”

The magic soldier chanted even as she ran up to Zena, unleashing the spell beside her.

“...■ **Blade Storm** Yaiba Arashi!”

The strongest Wind Magic spell in Zena’s repertoire unleashed inside the mole’s vulnerable mouth.

ZZZZZZMOOOOOOG.

The whirl of “Windblades” swept down the mole’s throat and tore its lungs and vital organs to shreds from the inside.

This proved too much even for the powerful yellow mole, and soon its life was snuffed out.

Zena and Karina were blown back by the recoil but protected by Raka’s barrier; when their friends came running over, they were happy to find them unharmed.



“How very noisy.”

As the girls rejoiced in their reunion, a man suddenly appeared before them.

He had deathly pale bluish skin, handsome features, and wavy violet hair.

“...Who is this pale fellow? Did you all make a new friend on your way here?”

“Lady Karina! Be careful! That is no ordinary man!”

Raka’s tone was warning as Karina quickly stood.

“An Intelligent Item? ...Marstill, is that you?!”

“How do you know that name? Are you by chance...the progenitor? Ban Helsing?!”

The man, who was indeed the progenitor vampire Ban, addressed Raka by a different name.

“Do you know this fellow, Mr. Raka?”

“I-indeed. My master many years prior challenged him many times, and was

never once victorious."

"I did so enjoy those battles of ours. So this lass is your master now, eh?"

Ban peered at Karina.

"E-excuse me!"

Once there was an opening in the conversation, Zena spoke up.

"Hmm. I know your face."

"Yes, you saved my life from monsters. Thank you so much!"

"Aah, so you're the lass from that day. Not to worry. I've already been well thanked for that occasion."

Zena had once been gravely injured on her first expedition into the labyrinth, and Ban rescued her.

"Zena, you are a friend of the Blue People? I inquire."

"Yes, he saved my life."

"Blue People? So this is one of those folks that the explorers talk about?"

Karina recognized the phrase from Huit's question and seemed to accept that explanation.

"But why is Sir Ban with all of you, Lilio?"

"We ran into him while we were looking for you, and he helped us out when we explained that our friends got lost."

"...I happen to have a knack for tracking people down in the labyrinth, that is all."

Ban looked away, hiding his embarrassment.

As he gazed across the room, there was a sudden collapsing of rocks, and a worm peeked out from the wall.

"I knew it. Wall eaters..."

Ban produced a shuriken and threw it expertly at the worm, killing it instantly.

"These creatures are fond of damp rocks. No doubt they are the cause of the

labyrinth village's water source drying up. They must have chewed holes in the walls and floor of the waterway, causing the water to leak into the Lower Stratum."

"That may be why the floor gave way beneath Lady Karina, too."

Iona nodded thoughtfully at Ban's explanation.

"So if we defeat those worms, that would remove the cause of the waterway's destruction? I inquire."

"Precisely."

"Me! Tria has insect repellent!" Tria raised her hand eagerly.

"Oh-ho? This is quite a high-quality item."

Ban stroked his chin, looking impressed.

The repellent had been specially produced by Satou at Arisa's request.

"This ought to make quick work of the problem for the most part."

Tria fired up the torch-like repellent at Ban's signal, and he used his Blood Magic to enhance the smoke's effects.

"Zena, was it? Perhaps you could use your Wind Magic to send this smoke through the holes in the walls and ceiling."

"Of course!"

Zena's spell sent the smoke into the wormholes, and before long, the creatures began dropping from the ceiling.

Karina and the others destroyed every last one.

"...It looks like we've gotten just about all of them now."

"Yes, Zena. We shall begin recovering the materials, I declare."

Nearly fifty wall eater corpses were piled up in the cavern. The homunculus sisters began collecting the monster cores and placing the remaining corpses into their transportation Fairy Packs.

"I have found a treasure chest, I report! Tria, I request your unlocking assistance."

As they were breaking down the mole corpse, the youngest sister, Huit, found a treasure chest.

“Tria will try her best!”

When Tria finally managed to open the chest, they found a great deal of treasure, including coins, gems, antique accessories, and even a staff.

“I have found a Magic Staff! Vier, I request your analysis.”

“...Unclear. My skill level must not be high enough, I appraise.”

“Hmm. Let me see it, eh?”

Ban took the staff and used “Analyze” on it.

“...An Earthply Staff. Perfect. Use this to reinforce the walls of the waterway. I trust you can take things from here...”

With that, Ban handed the staff back to Vier, then turned into a cloud of mist and vanished.

The sisters led the rest of the group back to the waterway, where they took turns using the Earthply Staff to repair the hole-ridden waterway.

“What a useful staff, I remark.”

“But the gemstone at the end is smaller than before. I think maybe it has a limited number of uses?”

Lilio was right: The Earth Pearl at the tip of the staff had shrunk to around half its original size.

“Well, the water isn’t leaking anymore. This should be good enough.”

The water was now flowing through the waterway instead of into the holes, even if it was still only a trickle.

“I dunno, something’s still off. This ain’t enough water for the whole village, is it?”

“Maybe there’s some blockage somewhere?”

Lou responded to Erina’s remark.

Agreeing that this was likely, the group made their way upstream to

investigate.

“It is indeed stuck, I report.”

“Yeah, we can see that.”

“Tria knows all about this! That rock is the keystone! If we destroy it, the dam will break, I declare!”

Tria pointed at one of the rocks.

She didn’t remove it right away, presumably because she knew what would happen.

But apparently, not everyone was aware of that vital information.

“Huit will do it, I declare!”

“Wait—”

Before Tria could stop her, Huit used “Body Strengthening” with her “Foundation” abilities and pulled out the keystone.

An instant later, the dam broke, and the massive amount of water it was holding back burst out in a muddy torrent, swallowing the girls up and sweeping them away.



The water gushed out into the muddy bog beneath the labyrinth village.

The magic lights that had been set up there to investigate shone on the pillar of water, alerting the people in the village who peered down below.

“Water!”

“The water’s back!”

“Now we won’t have to leave our home!”

“That mage gal and the Shield Princesses really did it!”

The villagers cheered, all else forgotten as they celebrated together.

“...Wait, it stopped already!”

“No, it’s still flowing a little bit...”

“Something’s stuck in there.”

Their observations were correct.

The earth gave into the pressure and broke, and an even more powerful torrent of water gushed into the air.

At the top of the pillar was the entire group of girls, cradled in a bowl-shaped version of Raka’s barrier, though it seemed rather cramped, since there were so many of them.

“A ball of light...?”

The shape dropped to the ground, and Raka’s barrier vanished, revealing the girls safe inside.

“No, it’s a busty lady!”

“The mage girl and the Shield Princesses are there, too!”

The villagers’ cheers grew even wilder.

Zena and Karina looked at each other, completely drenched.

“Our mission succeeded, Lady Karina.”

“Another victory for those who refuse to give up, I say!”

They bumped their fists together, both grinning widely.

At the end of their ordeal, it seemed their friendship was now stronger than ever before.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana.

I want to thank you for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Volume 19! Including the EX volume, that brings the series to a total of twenty books! I can't thank all of you readers enough for following *Death March* all this time, and I hope you'll keep reading it for a long time to come.

I'm running low on pages this volume for the first time in a while, so I'll keep the highlights short.

In the previous volume, Arisa and Lulu gave the Prayer Ring to Hikaru. This time, Satou will take action to free those two kindhearted girls from the Geist that keeps them bound as slaves.

I used the web version of the Kuvork Kingdom arc as the base, and included the Vistall Duchy storyline that was mostly ignored in the web version, restructuring them as a completely new story. That means the writing is almost entirely new, so I think even web novel readers will find plenty to enjoy.

And don't worry—there are plenty of heartwarming scenes with Satou and his friends, too!

Since I'm running out of room already, I'll skip right to the thank-yous! To my editors Mr. I, Mr. S, and A-san, illustrator shri-san, and everyone else who was involved in the production, advertisement, sale, distribution, and tie-ins related to this book: Thank you so much!

And of course, to all of you readers. Thank you for reading this volume all the way to the end!

Let's meet again next volume, in the Parion Province arc!

Hiro Ainana

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